



The Snow Ball Effect by **mugglemom2**

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Summary: Mike just wanted a few minutes with Jane, what could go wrong? Scenes from the Snow Ball, and the days following. This is my first ever story, so reviews are better than Eggos!

1. Chapter 1- The Snow Ball

"Tinsel?"

"Yeah, it's this stuff," Mike explained, picking a thin strand of silver out of her hair. A few pieces had fallen from the decorations overhead, one settling in El's hair, on top of her curls. Mike carefully extracted the last piece of sparkling foil. His fingers paused for a second on one of those curls, thinking her hair felt like silk.

Jane's hair, he mentally corrected himself. Jane now, because that's what she and her dad wanted, and he of course understood why. The name Eleven didn't exactly hold warm memories for Jane. Still, he liked secretly thinking of her as El; he occasionally slipped up and called her that. After all, it was the nickname he had given her when they'd first met.

"Why do school dances have to end at 9:30? That's like a baby's bedtime," Mike mumbled, glancing at the clock on the wall. The time was moving way too fast for his liking.

"I don't mind," Jane said matter of factly. After a year of confinement in the cabin, she was determined not to let anything get in the way of the evening. She was with Mike and their friends, finally at the Snow Ball, just as he had promised they would be. It may have been a year later, but they were here. That is all that mattered to her. When her dad had mentioned maybe allowing her to go to the Snow Ball, she had jumped at the opportunity. She and Mike had dutifully listened to his lecture on the rules, nodding at all the right times, promising to be extra careful.

"Hey, it's almost 9:30," Mike observed with a sigh. "Want to get a few minutes of fresh air before the coach turns back into a pumpkin?"

"Pumpkin?"

"Never mind, bad joke. I'll explain it later. Let's just see if we can get out of here."

He took Jane's hand and lead her toward the back door of the gym,

watching carefully for any teachers' prying eyes. When the coast was clear, he gripped her hand a bit tighter and they slipped out the back door and into the hall of Hawkins Middle School.

Ah, we are finally alone, Mike thought. When they were dancing, Mike had felt like they were the only two people in the world, that was until his friends saw their brief kiss and proceeded to tease them with kissing noises and calls of "lovebirds" repeatedly. Jane remained blissfully oblivious but Mike was starting to feel the walls close in on them, especially as the time neared 9:30.

Jane instinctively moved closer to Mike as they walked. She wanted to enjoy every minute, and to be as close to him as possible. Mike was certainly not complaining, content for the few moments of solitude with his girl. The music and noise from the gym faded behind them.

Mike felt her shift a bit next to him and knew something was bothering her. They had reached the end of the hall and he turned toward her, concerned.

"You okay?" He asked.

Jane looked up at him, her eyes full of worry. God, her eyes are so pretty, he thought. He hated to see the look of sadness and tension there.

"Mike," she said in a voice barely above a whisper, "Dad said another year..."

So that's why she looked so sad and worried, he realized. And he felt the same way. He knew they couldn't bear 365 more days of desperately speaking into walkie talkies and getting no response. Another year of wondering what the other was doing, if they were ok. For Jane, it would mean another year of visiting Mike purely in her mind, reaching out to touch him only to have him disappear like smoke.

He brightened up as he remembered, "Hey, didn't your dad say we could help you get ready for school next year? We would have to see each other to do that! And he let us come here tonight. That's got to be a good sign."

Jane smiled. That's better, he thought. They were leaning against a door that lead outside and without really thinking about it, he pushed it open. They made their way to a nearby bench, still hand in hand.

Sitting on the bench, Jane snuggled closer to Mike and he put both arms around her for warmth. The night was cold and clear, their breaths visible in the crisp air. Her head was on his chest. He rubbed her arms, rested his chin on top of her head, and breathed in deeply. Her hair smells like strawberries, he thought. How can a person even smell this good? God, his friends would tease him like crazy if they knew what he was thinking right now. He closed his eyes, wishing this moment could last forever. Her next question broke the silence.

"What is school like?" she asked quietly. That twinge of nervousness had slipped back into her voice. She looked up at him, big brown eyes searching his for reassurance.

Mike held her close and replied, "It's not bad! You get to see your friends every day and some teachers are really cool. Just think, you'll get to start high school with us. You can even be in AV club!"

He honestly didn't know if the high school had AV club, but hell, he thought, we will start one if we have to. Anything for Jane.

"Won't know anything though," she said sadly.

"Jane, you're the smartest person I know! You'll do great. The guys and I will help you and be there the whole time. Besides, your dad is the chief of police. It's not like any mouth breathers will mess with you."

She grinned at that, clearly feeling better. Their faces were inches apart. He could see every perfect eyelash, every little freckle. He bent down and kissed her softly, his lips lingering on hers a little longer than they had during their quick dance floor kiss. Her arms wrapped around his neck and Mike thought to himself that he could never feel better than he did right now. This girl, she's perfect. He pulled her closer.

They were so entranced with each other, they didn't even hear the

door they had used a few minutes before (hadn't it only been a few minutes?) open forcefully. Nor were they aware of a very large, very angry police chief of a father who came barreling out said door, his eyes wildly searching around him. The worry and fear on his face dissolved into anger when he spotted the bench. And the two young teens locked in an embrace on it.

"GET your hands off my daughter!" The voice broke their reverie with such force that they flew apart and Mike fell off the side of the bench, landing with a thud.

"What the hell is going on? Do you have any idea what time it is?!"

Jane and Mike's hands were grasped together, as he was attempting to scramble up from his very undignified spot on the ground. She turned his wrist to look at his watch and read, "Ten-zero-five."

10:05?! thought Mike. That can't be right. There's no way we were out here thirty-five minutes, was there?

Jane was still studying the watch, as if she too could not believe it was accurate.

"Oh, shi..." she started to say but the last word was stopped by Mike's hand clamping over her mouth. He had found his feet and was standing over Jane, trying to catch his breath after being so startled. Even in his disheveled and alarmed state, he had enough self preservation to know that adding cursing to their list of transgressions would not be wise.

The chief's eyes narrowed as he regarded them both. This can't be happening, thought Mike. Jane had removed his hand from her mouth with a confused look.

"What was that, young lady?" The chief growled.

"Using a word you say, Dad!" Jane answered brightly. Mike's head was frantically shaking and he was mouthing "no, no, no" in a futile attempt to stop her from talking. It wasn't working. "And you say it too, Mike!" Jane added cheerfully, clearly happy and proud of herself. "It can be the word of the day!"

Mike's hands covered his face. He could feel himself blushing and was suddenly wishing the ground would swallow him whole. Where was a Demogorgon when you need one?!

Hopper exhaled, his breath in the air reminding him how cold it was. His eyes settled on Mike, fixing him with a steely glare. Mike gulped hard, wondering where that lump in his throat had come from, hoping he wasn't visibly shaking.

"So tell me, Wheeler," Hopper said slowly and deliberately, enunciating every syllable, "At what point did you think it a good idea to get my daughter out here alone in the freezing cold and have your grubby hands all over her? After all of our talks about the rules and keeping her safe?"

Mike just stared. Was he supposed to actually answer? He caught a chill and shivered briefly. Had it been this cold out here the whole time? Surely not. He had felt so warm a few minutes ago.

Since the chief was still staring at him, he figured he should try to come up with a response. But what was he supposed to say? That they weren't cold because they were kissing? That he hadn't really thought about it? That the lectures about keeping her safe hadn't entered his head when faced with the opportunity for just a few minutes alone? Once again, self preservation nixed that idea. Instead he found himself stammering, "Uh, you see, uh, sir, we were just.."

Hopper held up his hand. "You can stop right there. I know what you were doing. I also know that I was about to have a heart attack looking for you two. At 9:30, all of the other kids came out of the gym, they got in their parents' cars. And there I am, looking around for Jane, and Nancy is looking for you. But you were nowhere to be found. Your friends hadn't seen you. So I'm picturing all sorts of horrible things happening to you and it turns out you're just outside, behind the school, being highly inappropriate with my little girl. Sound about right?"

"NOT a little girl," Jane was incredulous.

"And this is not a good time to be talking back," Hopper snapped. "You ARE my little girl and you have not been out in the world long

enough to decide just what is and isn't suitable behavior. So don't test me right now."

Mike's eyes were as big as saucers. This wasn't good at all. Jane's dad is highly pissed, he thought, we'll be lucky if we're not grounded till we're 20.

Jane took Hopper's hand and turned to face him.

"Dad," she said softly, looking up at him to get his attention, and Hopper felt his tough exterior give, just a tiny bit. It had only been about a month that she had been calling him that and his heart still melted a little every time she did.

"Don't be mad at Mike," She implored him in a gentle voice, then added enthusiastically, "I had my grubby hands on him too!" She didn't know quite what that meant but she knew that she and Mike had both been doing the same thing, and it didn't seem fair for her dad to be mad only at Mike about it.

"Sshhh, El, please don't" Mike quietly pleaded with her. He knew she was trying to help but every time she spoke, it was making things worse.

"Jane," she corrected him.

"Jane, sorry."

Hopper spoke next, breaking the tension. He was clearly still angry, his features hard and unmoving.

"Jane, we will discuss this more at home. Mike, your parents will be hearing from me about what happened. You won't be seeing each other for awhile."

Panic shot through Mike at those words. "How long?" He asked, trying not to let his voice crack. His throat felt thick.

"I don't know, kid. Long enough for you both to learn what is acceptable behavior and what isn't."

"We know, honestly we do," Mike interjected, a tone of desperation in

his voice. "We'll never do this again. The time just got away from us! We didn't meant to be gone so long."

"Well you failed miserably at that last part. Say your goodbyes, quickly, and now."

"Mike," Jane turned toward him, "I had a really good time at the dance. Thank you." She leaned forward to kiss his cheek, only to be pulled back by Hopper.

"Think again. There's been quite enough of that tonight." His hands were on Jane's shoulders, ready to steer her toward his truck. He turned his gaze once again to Mike, pointing a finger at him.

"You will go back in there, find your sister, and apologize for scaring her. Then you will go straight home. Do I make myself clear?"

Mike cleared his throat. "Yes, sir." He was speaking to Hopper but his eyes were on Jane, trying to focus on her as long as he could. How long would it be before they saw each other again?

Mike knew he should be inside, finding Nancy. But he couldn't make himself turn away until Jane and the chief were in his truck, driving toward the street. He watched until the truck's lights were red dots in the distance, taking Jane further and further from him.

2. Chapter 2- Mike

"May as well go in and face the music, kiddo." Nancy said sympathetically.

"I know," Mike sighed. "It's after 10:30 though. That means Dad's already fallen asleep in his chair. Maybe Mom went to bed?"

"Before we got home? Wishful thinking. Let's go. Chief Hopper said he'd be calling anyway." With that, Nancy opened the door to the Wheeler home. Their mom appeared instantly, enveloping both of her children in a hug.

"Oh, thank goodness! I've been so worried! The dance ended an hour ago! Where have you been? With everything that's happened with Will last year, you can't imagine how scared I was when you two didn't come home!" Mrs. Wheeler released them from her embrace, putting her hands on her hips and pointing a glare their way. The relief on her face had given way to anger.

"Nancy, I trusted you to be responsible." Her voice was a mixture of disappointment and displeasure. "Apparently that was a mistake."

Nancy opened her mouth to speak but Mike interrupted.

"Mom, this wasn't her fault. It was me..." Mike was still wondering where the perfect night had gone so wrong. And things were not looking to improve anytime soon.

"Is that a fact, Michael? Go on." Her arms were crossed as she leveled Mike with a stare. She had used his full name. That was never a good sign.

"Well, uh, Jane and I wanted a few minutes to, uh, talk. So we went outside for just a little bit! We weren't doing anything wrong..." Mike's words trailed off as his brain worked in overtime, trying to figure out how to put a positive spin on what had happened. I'm dead meat, he thought. There's no good way to say that Jane's dad caught them outside, kissing, more than 30 minutes after the dance ended.

"Keep talking, mister. And don't skip over the reason the chief is going to be calling me. Yes, I heard Nancy say that right before you came in."

Mike bit his lip, searching for what to say. His mind was a blank. The truth was going to sound so much worse than it is, he thought to himself. She's going to kill me.

"I'm listening, Mike."

"Um..." His eyes scanned the room, as if he would find some inspiration for what to say. "Uh..."

Her normally boundless patience was gone. She let out a breath, took his arm, reached around, and delivered one swift smack to the seat of his pants. It definitely got his attention.

"Mom! I'm way too old for that!" His hand instinctively went back and rubbed at the sting. He hated that it did. Like a kid younger than Holly, he thought.

"Not to me. And I'm still waiting for an explanation," his mother said.

Nancy cleared her throat. Mike had forgotten she was there. "Mom, I'm going to bed, ok? I don't think I need to be down here for this." She patted Mike on the shoulder. "Good luck, buddy." And with that, she turned and disappeared up the stairs.

Mrs. Wheeler's eyes softened a bit as she regarded her son. He was squirming, clearly uncomfortable and upset. "Come on, honey." She lead him into the kitchen and sat down at the table, her eyes clearly letting him know he was expected to do the same. She poured them each a glass of milk and got out some chocolate chip cookies. Suddenly the emotions of the night came flooding back at him and his eyes filled with unshed tears. Great, he thought. My mom smacked me and now I'm sitting here crying like a little girl. He put his head down, feeling utterly defeated.

His mom waited a moment before saying, "Talk to me, Mike." Her voice was kind and understanding.

He drew in a deep breath. It's now or never, he thought. "Chief

Hopper found me and Jane outside. We were just sitting on a bench and talking! But I didn't realize how late it had gotten, honest. I thought it was 9:30 and it was more like 10:05. The chief was so mad. I don't know when he will let me see Jane again. I really screwed up..." His voice trailed off and the traitorous tears returned. He took a swig from his glass to deflect attention from the fact that he was trying hard not to cry.

"Oh, sweetie. I know the chief is very protective of Jane. And if you two are going to be 'friends,' you've got to respect his rules. End of story."

Mike nodded. He was feeling a little better, his mom's voice providing much needed comfort.

"Give it a bit of time," his mom continued gently. "Jane's dad is new to the whole parent thing. And Jane having such a difficult background means he's understandably concerned about her."

If you only knew how 'difficult' Jane's background actually was, Mike thought. As far as his mom knew, Jane was Hopper's distant relative whom he recently adopted because she came from an abusive situation, and she had never been in school before. Most of that was true anyway. She did come from an abusive background and Hopper had indeed adopted her. It was the same story Hopper planned to tell when he enrolled Jane in school next year, so it made sense to start telling a few people now.

Mrs. Wheeler rubbed his arm reassuringly and gave him a slight smile. She got up and took their glasses to the sink.

"So tell me," she began in a nonchalant tone, "Were you really just 'talking'? Because I'm wondering if Chief Hopper would have been that angry if that's all it was, hmm? I'm not sure he would say he's going to call me if it was just talking..."

She was standing at the sink so her back was to Mike. Thank goodness, he thought, as he felt his face blush deep red. Ugh, don't make me say it.

"Mooooom..." he responded in a whine.

"Come on Mike, I wasn't born yesterday."

"We may have been, um, you know, kissing, just a little bit..." Now I can officially die of embarrassment, he thought. What a way to go.

"I see. Well that coupled with the fact that you sneaked out of the gym would explain his reaction."

"Do you think he will let me see her again?" Mike asked quietly, the lump reappearing in his throat. His voiced hitched a bit on the last word. He couldn't even bear to think of being kept apart.

"I'm sure he will. Any parent wants their child to be happy and clearly, you make Jane happy."

"Thanks, Mom. She makes me happy too. I can't wait for you to meet her. I keep telling her what a good cook you are. Could we have her over for dinner sometime? Ya know, if she's not grounded until college."

"I'd like that, honey," Mrs. Wheeler said kindly. "And speaking of being grounded..."

And there it was. Just when he thought he was in the clear.

"Mom!"

"Yes?" she replied sweetly.

"Wait, why am I in trouble? I told you, we didn't mean for any of it to happen!"

"I know, sweetie. But I also know that you were out of line tonight, yes?"

"I guess so..." He couldn't think of an argument to that.

"And you knew the rules, yes?"

Mike nodded sadly, his eyes suddenly becoming very interested in the floor.

"I said, you knew the rules, yes?"

He raised his head and looked up at her, figuring it was time to majorly kiss up. "Yes, ma'am."

He only called her ma'am when he was afraid he was in big trouble. She reached out and ruffled his hair.

"I think a week of no bike will help you remember in the future."

Mike sighed, resigned to his fate. It could have been much worse.

"Okay, loverboy, time for bed. Get some sleep. Tomorrow would be the perfect day for you to clean out the garage, wouldn't you agree?"

Mike groaned. "Sure. And thanks. You're a really great mom." He hugged her.

"Uh-uh, no amount of smooth talk will get you out of trouble," she laughed, returning the embrace.

"I know. Good night, Mom."

Mike trudged upstairs. He stopped at Nancy's bedroom door and knocked softly. He didn't want to wake her up.

"Come on in, kiddo!" She called.

Nancy was in bed, her hair wrapped in a towel on top of her head, flipping through a magazine. She put it down and looked at her brother.

"Glad to see you survived. What's the verdict?"

Mike shrugged, leaning against her door frame. "I can't ride my bike for a week and I have to clean out the garage tomorrow."

"You got off pretty easy. Though the garage is nasty. Have fun with that."

"Yeah, I guess it's not too bad. Hey, I'm sorry I disappeared at the dance."

"I know, kiddo, you already told me at the school."

"That time, it was just because Hopper told me to. This time I really mean it. I know it was a dumb thing to do. I wasn't thinking."

Nancy laughed at that. "Ok, well I'm glad you mean it this time. Hey, listen, you know you can talk to me, right?"

"Sure," Mike answered, not sure where this was going.

"So if you ever have any questions about girls, or anything like that, you can come to me, ok?"

Mike groaned, "Oh my gosh, I do NOT have any questions about that!" Could this night get any more embarrassing?

Nancy held up her hands in defeat. "Understood. I was just offering."

Mike backed out of her room, eager to end this conversation before the questions got more personal.

"Good night!" He called as he hurried down the hall to his own room. He quickly changed into pajamas and got into bed. He drifted off to sleep, remembering those few minutes of bliss on the bench with Jane. It was worth it, he thought.

The next morning, Mike was awakened by sunlight streaming in through his window and the smell of breakfast cooking. He decided not to shower. I'm just going to get filthy cleaning the stupid garage, he thought to himself. He put on his oldest jeans and faded t shirt and headed down to breakfast. He stopped at the top of the steps at the sound of his mom on the phone.

"Yes, Chief, I appreciate you calling. I assure you, I had a long talk with Michael last night." Mike moaned and softly beat his head against the wall.

"Um, hmm, oh I agree. That's very reasonable. How is Jane this morning?"

Mike's ears perked up at the mention of her name. He stretched to hear better.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. Whenever you feel comfortable with it, we would love to have Jane over for dinner. You too, of course."

Mike wanted to yell out, No, Mom, not him too! I'd be a nervous wreck with Jane's dad staring me down. But he figured dinner with Jane and her dad was better than no dinner with Jane. What would she call that?

Oh yeah, compromise.

Halfway happy.

3. Chapter 3- Jane

Thank you to everyone who is reading, following, favoriting, and reviewing! This is my first story so the feedback means the world to me. Enjoy more fluffy moments- here's chapter 3.

The ride home in the truck had been quiet. Jane looked out the window, focusing on the stars. Tension radiated from her dad, so she remained silent. Every now and then, he would exhale loudly and put his hand on his forehead, as if that could erase the images of earlier from his brain. Can't believe that little twerp, he thought to himself. Then he glanced at Jane and wondered if she were as blameless in the whole thing as he had first thought. She looked so innocent, her big brown eyes gazing at the stars.

The truck rambled up the gravel road in front of their house. Hopper got out quickly, saying, "Let's go kid. It's too cold out here to hang around freezing." He gestured toward the house, motioning Jane to follow him.

Jane entered the house and instinctively went to turn on the TV. It was always the first thing she did.

"Oh no. Not happening." Hopper said, stepping in front of it.

Jane stared, her mouth dropping open in disbelief.

"Dad! TV?" She asked hopefully, searching his face for clues. She briefly considered turning it on with her mind but then decided against it. He was already mad.

He shook his head with an emphatic, "No way."

"Grounded?" She questioned sadly, taking his hand in hers and looking up at him. Why does she have to look at me with those doe eyes, Hopper thought. It could melt him in a second. He reminded himself of the events of the last hour and fixed her with a hard glare.

"You'd better believe it. Do you know how scared I was when all of those other kids came out of the dance right at 9:30 but MY kid was

not among them?"

Hearing him call her his kid was too much. She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him tightly, sniffing back tears.

"You're brave. You don't get scared," she mumbled, burying her head in his chest.

"Ha! Oh yes, I do," he answered, "You and I have faced some pretty scary stuff together, haven't we?"

She nodded, brown curls bobbing up and down against him.

He took her elbows and held her away from his body a bit, so he could lean down, eye to eye with her. Her eyes were glistening.

"Well, I'm telling you, Jane Hopper, no monster is as scary to me as the thought of something bad happening to YOU. Do you understand? Why I got so angry earlier?"

She dissolved into tears at that point. She threw her arms around him again and cried.

"I'm sorry, Dad!" She bawled, "I'm really sorry Mike and I had our grubby hands all over each other!"

Hopper winced. "Please, never say that again, deal?"

Jane looked confused but nodded in agreement. Hopper lead her to the couch and sat down, putting his arm around her and holding her close. She's ok, she's safe, he told himself.

"So, did you follow our rules tonight?" He asked, ducking his head to catch her gaze with his own pointed glare. She shook her head, looking at the floor and avoiding eye contact.

He gently took her chin and lifted her head to face him. "None of that. You're going to have to talk to me about this. What were you thinking, leaving the gym?"

Jane took a deep breath and responded, "Mike said we could go talk. Be alone."

Uh-huh, thought Hopper. I knew it. I should have strangled the Wheeler kid when I had the chance.

"But I talked too! I wanted to know about school. It was nice. To be alone. Is that bad?" She asked.

Hopper sighed. What do I tell her? Why didn't the adoption papers come with a manual?

"It's not bad to enjoy talking. To a friend," he emphasized the last word.

"It was not a good choice though, to leave the gym where there were lots of people and go outside with just Mike. What would you have done if something had happened? Not to mention the fact that you weren't exactly aware of your surroundings when I found you. I could have been a Demogorgon coming out of the school and you two would not have come up for air until it was too late."

Jane didn't understand that. Her forehead wrinkled with a questioning look. "We had air. Lots of it!"

I am not making this clear, Hopper thought. He let out an exasperated breath. "Listen to me. You are too young to be doing what I, uh, saw you doing! You get that?"

Jane's eyes opened wide at him then found the floor again. "Oh," she said quietly.

"Yeah. So, you left the area where you were supposed to be, you stayed gone way too late, you scared your old dad half to death, AND you were wrapped around Mike Wheeler like your life depended on it. Want to ask about TV again?"

Her head shook quickly back and forth. "I was stupid. And we're not stupid!"

"No, I don't want to hear you say that about yourself. You made a mistake. That's part of being a kid. But please don't go off like that again. My heart can't take it."

"I'll be good. I'll follow the rules. Promise."

"And if I ever see you and that boy acting like THAT again, you won't see a TV until you're 30. Understand?"

The color drained from her face at the thought of that. She nodded vigorously.

She summoned the courage to ask cautiously, "Dad? Can I see Mike? Soon?"

Hopper raised his eyebrows and looked at Jane. This would be another time that a manual would come in very handy.

"I need to think about when that can happen. And I need to talk to his parents. You two made some not-so-good choices tonight. We have to be sure you know how to behave. Look, I know he's important to you. And I remember keeping you apart didn't go so well last time, even though it was necessary to keep you safe. So, yes, you will see him. Soon."

"How many days?" Boy, she is not going to let this go, he realized.

"I'm not sure yet, kid."

"How many days?" No, definitely not letting it go, "Five? Seven? Twenty?"

Her chin had dropped and she was focusing on him with an intense stare. Her fists were clenched at her sides. The TV began to shake slightly. Hopper looked over his shoulder at it, the screen was rattling. This needed to be over for tonight.

He spoke with no room for interpretation, "Calm down, Jane. You break that TV, I'm not fixing it. Or buying a new one. One week until you see Mike. Seven days. Now take a deep breath."

Jane began to slowly relax, but she added, "Four days?" with a hopeful expression.

Hopper sized her up and crossed his arms. So we are entering into a negotiation here. Well it will be a short one.

"Five days. Best you're going to get. And you go straight to bed right

now and don't ask me anymore."

Her face brightened, "Compromise! Five days till Mike!"

He hugged her. "Halfway happy, kid?" he said with a chuckle.

She returned the hug. "No. All the way happy."

4. Chapter 4- Hopper

Thank you to everyone reading! Please review!

The morning after the Snow Ball was a frosty one. Jane's eyes opened slowly, and she caught a chill. She pulled the covers up to her face and snuggled in the bed. She had slept soundly, no bad dreams disturbing her rest. The nightmares were less frequent but still came from time to time. *Papa*, she remembered, often made an appearance in her worst dreams. She shuddered at the memory and pulled the covers up even tighter. I'm safe, she repeated in her head. No Papa and no nightmares. She would often visualize what was real to reassure herself. My Dad, our home, Mike, Dustin, Will, Lucas. They are real, they are here. Papa and the lab are gone, she comforted herself and breathed deeply, like her Dad had told her to do when scary thoughts came.

Her mind drifted to a more pleasant memory, the night before, and she smiled. The Snow Ball had been amazing for Jane. She had worn a pretty dress, danced with Mike, and got to see all of their friends. It was magical. The best part was the time she and Mike had alone. After almost a year of being kept apart, the time they spent just the two of them was even more special. She suddenly felt warmer, remembering being in Mike's arms, so safe and loved. Until another memory of the night before came to her. The image of her Dad, his eyes filled with worry, then anger, when he found them outside. Jane clenched her eyes shut tightly and hugged her teddy bear. Hopper had been mad, and made no attempt to hide that fact from Mike or her. She frowned as she recalled the disappointment in his face when they talked at home, and he had told her that nothing could be scarier for him than something bad happening to her. Then had come the part about no TV and no seeing Mike for five days. Jane would have liked to forget that.

As if he knew she was awake, Hopper's voice came resounding through the house.

"Breakfast! Come on, kid," she could hear him calling from the kitchen.

She got out of bed and peered out of her room, peeking around the corner. She wasn't even sure what she was looking for, maybe to see if the TV was on? To see if her Dad was still angry?

Suddenly his face appeared directly in front of her. She jumped back a bit, startled.

"Why are you looking around like you're afraid to come out of your room?" He questioned her. "Are you scared of something?"

She shook her head, "Not scared." Next, she ventured to ask, "TV?"

She could tell by his face what the answer was, and it was not what she wanted to hear.

"Nope, not today," he replied with no room for interpretation. Her response was a full pout, complete with bottom lip sticking out. He refused to let that weaken his resolve. "You are still not off the hook for last night."

"Off the hook?" She asked.

"It means you're still being punished, but you don't have to act like you're scared to walk around the house. I do still plan to feed you," he said with a slight grin, pointing to the table. That's better, she thought. He's smiling. She saw waffles and fruit and milk at her place.

He was sipping his coffee and reading the newspaper as she slid into her chair.

"Did you sleep ok?" He asked, looking up at her. He was making conversation but also wanted to be sure she hadn't had any nightmares. She nodded and he cleared his throat, meeting her eyes. He had been encouraging her to use words, preferably in complete sentences.

"Yes, I did," she corrected herself.

"Good," he responded. "I spoke to Mike's mom a bit ago. Remember I told both of you kids last night that I would be calling her?"

Now he had her attention. She started to nod, but then added, "Yes, I remember. And I remember five days."

Boy, she will not forget that detail, he thought. Can't remember to answer in sentences but she sure knows when she can see the Wheeler kid again. Heaven help me raise a teenage girl.

"Mrs. Wheeler agrees that five days is more than fair. So on Wednesday evening, we are going over there for dinner. We figured you two need supervision on your next visit, considering what happened at the dance."

Jane continued to eat while taking in his words. Dinner at Mike's sounded great to her, though she knew she may feel nervous once Wednesday arrived. She had never met Mike's parents before. Being a little uncomfortable was worth it to get to see Mike.

She was turning her fork, swirling it in the syrup left on her plate. The fork repeatedly scraped against the dish, the resulting noise similar to fingernails on a chalkboard. Hopper winced. He reached over and put his hand on top of hers.

"Don't play with that. We will work some more on your table manners, especially before Wednesday. And eat the rest of your food, please."

Jane wrinkled her nose at the cup of mixed fruit next to her plate. Hopper had told her more times than she could count that it was important for her to eat fruit and vegetables. They still were not her favorite, though. She tentatively stabbed a piece of pear with her fork, and held it up in front of her face. She looked at Hopper and asked, "Have to? It's mushy..."

He let out a sigh. "Yes, you have to. And it's rude to complain about the food someone serves you." She has so much to learn, he thought to himself. Can I really get her ready to go into society in a little less than a year? It's not even her fault, he mentally cursed that bastard Brenner. Hopper was determined though. As her father now, it fell to him to give her the best chance at a normal life as possible. She deserves that, and I'm going to make damn sure she gets it.

He watched his daughter dutifully do her best to follow his directions, taking a gulp of milk in between bites to wash down the fruit. A smile spread across his face. This kid, he thought. She's got me in the palm of her hand.

"And what should you do now?" He asked. Another lesson in manners.

Jane carefully took her dirty dishes to the sink then turned to Hopper, her eyes searching for approval.

"Good job, honey," he said, planting a kiss on top of her head. She beamed.

Jane walked the short distance to the living room and flopped down on the couch, letting out a long, dramatic breath. What was she supposed to do all day? Her eyes scanned the cabin, looking for something to do. Another frustrated sigh. She propped herself against the couch cushions and focused on a glass on the kitchen counter. Hopper was drying the breakfast dishes, a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. He watched the glass float a few inches off the counter, before reaching out and grabbing it mid-air.

"Whoa, that could have broken!" He scolded, looking at Jane with a disapproving glare. "What are you doing?"

"Bored," she huffed, wiping her pajama sleeve against her nose. "Not happy."

"Yeah, well, I'm not going to be happy if you get shattered glass all over the floor. So knock it off."

She frowned at him, feeling rebellious.

"Your fault," she mumbled, picking at a thread on the couch. She didn't even know why she felt so annoyed.

He tossed the dish towel he was holding into the sink. This is going to be a long Saturday, he thought. He wasn't sure there was enough coffee and cigarettes in the world for him to deal with a moody teenager with telekinesis. He couldn't let her disrespect slide, though.

"Excuse me? Care to explain that?" His eyes were focused on her intently.

She continued to mumble, looking at the spot she'd been picking, not raising her head to meet his stare.

"Your fault I'm not happy. No TV. Grounded."

He shook his head at her. "Oh no, it was your behavior that landed you in trouble, missy. If you don't understand that, you can go to your room and think about it. And no using your powers. You need to learn to deal with your feelings without levitating breakable objects."

More big words, more to learn, she thought to herself, adding to her frustration. How can I remember all of the things everyone expects me to? She got off the couch and stomped into her room, slamming the door behind her.

Hopper sat back down at the kitchen table, sighing into his cold cup of coffee. I could get out of here for a bit, he thought. Maybe go to the office for an hour or so and catch up on paperwork, give Jane and himself a break from the tension.

He went to her bedroom door and knocked, simultaneously turning the knob. Good, she had remembered the rule about not locking it.

She was laying on her bed with her back to the door; she gave no acknowledgment that he had entered her room.

"I have to go out for a bit. I won't be gone long. Remember, no TV. Hear me?"

No response from the bed. Not acceptable, he thought. He spoke a little more clearly, taking a step closer to her.

"Jane." Still no response. "I said, do you hear me?"

"Yes," was her solemn reply. Well, that was better than nothing.

He got his hat and coat and headed to his truck. Maybe I'll come home to a more pleasant kid, he hoped.

He drove toward town, not really sure exactly where he was going. Sure, he could go do paperwork at the office but he doubted that would improve his mood. Doughnut shop? No, he wasn't hungry. He found himself turning down a certain road, never quite making the decision. I guess the truck knows where to go, he thought.

He came to a stop in front of a familiar house. He knocked on the door.

"Hey, Joyce, can I come in?"

5. Chapter 5- Joyce

"Mom, did I hear someone at the door?" Will walked out of his room, still in his pajamas. Saturday mornings were for cartoons and games, as far as he was concerned. He saw Chief Hopper sitting at their kitchen table with his mom.

"Oh good morning, Chief," he said, rubbing his eyes.

"Hi there, Will. How was the dance last night?" Hopper asked.

"It was fun." He knew the dance had not ended well for Mike and didn't want to add any details about the evening. "Um, why are you here?" Will looked at him, clearly confused.

"Will! That is not very polite," his mom admonished.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Will stammered. "I just meant, is Jane ok?"

"She's fine. When I left, she was pouting in her room and not talking to me. So, yes, perfectly fine, given her age and gender," he answered sarcastically.

Will decided that needed no response. He grabbed a package of Pop Tarts and made a beeline back into his room.

Joyce was chuckling, "I think you scared him."

"Please," he responded with a note of sadness in his voice, "That kid has dealt with much worse. Both of our kids have."

"Good point," Joyce said, lighting a cigarette. "At the risk of being as rude as my son, I do want to know, why are you here? I mean, it's fine! You're welcome anytime. But, did something happen?"

"You could say that," Hopper took a deep drag from his own cigarette. "Last night I caught Jane and the Wheeler kid in a lip lock, outside, over a half hour after the dance ended. I was freaking out looking for them, but there they were, on that old bench behind the school, wrapped around each other."

Joyce laughed out loud, sending her into a coughing fit around the cigarette in her mouth.

"Oh, those poor kids!" She continued laughing, "You must have scared them to death!"

"Them?" Hopper was not amused at her reaction, "What about me?!"

Joyce fought to regain her composure, but was still snickering. "Ok, what happened next?"

"I told them it was wrong and unsafe and inappropriate. And I'll tell you, it took all of my self control not to show that boy just how displeased I was. I would have liked to wring his neck."

"Really? Because I'm pretty sure I remember you and I under the bleachers doing the same thing during school?" She challenged him, raising her eyebrows.

Hopper let out an exasperated sigh, "That was completely different! We were older. And neither of us were in semi hiding for our own safety."

She shrugged. "We were a bit older. And no 'bad men' or monsters were after us. But it's not that different. I'm just trying to give you a bit of perspective. I know that was shocking and upsetting for you, I get it. The kids were in the wrong. All I'm saying is, it's not the end of the world."

"No, we've already faced the end of the world and come through it. I may take that over what I saw last night though," Hopper said, rubbing his temples.

"What happened after you read Jane and Mike the riot act?"

"I took her home and told her she can't watch TV and she can't see that boy for five days. I wanted it to be a lot longer, believe me."

Joyce was nodding in approval. "Well done, Dad," she said, patting his hand.

"This morning, I talked to Karen Wheeler. She had already dealt with

her little Casanova. Jane and I are even going over there for dinner in a few days. I thought things were alright. But then Jane got all moody and sulking about being grounded. I wasn't even that hard on her!" Hopper was shaking his head. Am I crap at this parent thing? He thought.

"Don't second guess yourself. No kid likes restrictions. Rebelling and sulking are all part of adolescence. Half the time, they don't even know why they are doing it. Jane adores you, anyone can see that. You're a good father. You'll both survive this."

Hopper felt relieved, though he still had his doubts.

"And remember," she continued, "Adults in her life have not exactly been dependable, or even humane. She has to get used to having a parent that actually loves her and cares what happens to her. Take it in baby steps."

He took in her words, wondering if Jane could ever fully heal from her horrible upbringing. It was a long road ahead of both of them.

"So, Joyce, would you consider, possibly coming to dinner with us at the Wheelers' on Wednesday? I think it may help Jane feel more comfortable."

"Oh, it would help Jane, would it?" Joyce looked skeptical. Poor Hopper, she thought, I'll throw him a bone. But not before having a bit of fun. "Is Jane nervous about this dinner?"

"I think so. She has a lot to learn. This will be a good test of sorts, a trial run for how she will do in society."

Joyce was nodding in serious agreement. She could tell Jane was not the only nervous one.

"And Jane would feel better if I were there?" This was too good.

Hopper cleared his throat. "Well, yeah. She knows you. She, uh, feels better when you're around."

"Does she? Wednesday, you said? I'll have to check my calendar..." She made a point of reaching for her purse, rifling through it,

mumbling, "I'm thinking I had something Wednesday..." until she couldn't torture him anymore. She burst out laughing, tossing her head back.

"Of course I'll come! For Jane, like you said," eying him suspiciously. "Since she needs me..."

Hopper visibly relaxed, looking relieved. He lit a cigarette and sat back in his chair. They sat in comfortable silence. This feels so natural, Hopper thought. He looked at Joyce, thinking how everything seemed easier when she was there. She had been through hell and back and was still smiling. He couldn't get the image of her laughing out of his head. She has a pretty laugh, he caught himself musing. Oh no, Jim, he told himself. No time for that. You've got your hands full with raising a daughter and keeping this town in one piece. Plus, she recently lost that boyfriend, Bob. Dating should be the last thing on either of our minds.

"Hey, earth to Hop, come in for a landing. I'm talking to you. Are you listening?" Her voice broke his daydreaming.

"What? Oh, I'm listening. Now, what were you saying?"

She rolled her eyes and responded, "I was asking if you know what you're getting Jane for Christmas. It's coming up, you know. I hear it's on the 25th this year."

"Very funny," he said. "I have some ideas. Haven't bought anything yet, though. It's really her first Christmas. I want it to be special." Talking about Christmas gave him an idea of how to make things right with Jane today. He jumped up from the table, grabbing his hat and coat in the process.

"Thanks for everything, I just remembered something I have to do. And I told Jane I wouldn't be gone long."

Joyce was a bit surprised but said amiably, "You're quite welcome. Let me know if I can help with anything else. We'll be in touch before Wednesday."

"You're the best, Joyce," he called as he went out the door, clearly on

a mission.

Hopper stopped at his front door for just a second before giving the secret knock. He pressed his ear to the door, straining to hear if the TV was on. Stillness from inside. He knocked and the door unlocked. He walked in and since he didn't see Jane, he knew she had unlocked the door with her mind. I guess I can't fault her for that, he thought.

He found her at the kitchen table, working a puzzle. The table was littered with paper and colored pencils, evidence of how she had been passing the time. She did not look up or speak to him, choosing instead to remain focused on the task at hand. Ignoring me still, he thought.

"Hi, honey," he said kindly, wanting her to know he wasn't angry. Though if she didn't acknowledge his presence soon, he may get that way. He told himself not to lose his temper.

"It looks like you've been keeping yourself busy," he noted. More silence.

"I brought a surprise home." Silence still, but he did notice her shift a bit. That got her attention. Maybe if I ask her a question, he thought. She will have to talk to me then.

"Yep, I brought a surprise. Guess you're going to have to use words and talk to me. Want to see it?" His patience was starting to wear thin, but his voice remained calm.

"Maybe," she answered in a voice barely above a whisper, her eyes still concentrating on the puzzle. Ah, there we go, he thought. One point to Hopper. Baby steps.

"Hmm, ok. I'll take maybe. But I'm thinking maybe I should take it back. If my daughter keeps ignoring me. Maybe," he said casually.

Her head snapped around and her eyes found his as she said a bit louder, "Wait." And score, thought Hopper. I'm getting one word answers but at least she's talking to me.

"I'm waiting," and he was. Waiting for her to come around, for her to keep talking.

She got up and started stacking the papers that were strewn across the table, putting the colored pencils back in their box, and moving the part of the puzzle she'd completed to the side. She's cleaning up, trying to make me happy, he realized.

"We can do that later," he stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "The surprise is more important. And more fun," he said with a wink. Now he really had her attention.

"Have to tell you something," she said, looking him in the eyes, "I was good today. No TV."

He wrapped his arms around her in a hug.

"I'm proud of you, kid. I'm always proud of you. You know that nothing you could do can change that, right?"

She was glowing at his words, her arms still around him, "I know."

"I love you, kid"

She squeezed him tighter, "Love you, Dad."

He reluctantly ended their embrace, then looked at her and smiled.

"Now, this surprise really can't wait. I'll be right back."

She watched intently as he went out the door, and reappeared, one hand behind his back.

"Close your eyes," he instructed and she did.

"You can open them now."

She opened her eyes to see him holding a fluffy white kitten. Her hands went to her mouth in disbelief. The look on her face was pure joy. He handed the kitten to her.

"This is an early Christmas present. She will be your responsibility, got it? You're in charge of feeding her, playing with her, and changing the litter box. I've got all that stuff in the truck."

"I got it! I take care of her. Promise!" She was holding the kitten close to her face, stroking her soft fur. The kitten purred.

"And she'll need a name. That's up to you, too," Hopper said.

Jane looked at him, her eyes glistening with happy tears. She threw her arms around him, not letting go of the kitten, saying, "Thank you, Dad! Thank you!"

"I know you're here a lot by yourself so she can keep you company." And give you something to do during the day besides watch soap operas, he added to himself.

Jane nodded, still holding the kitten close.

"I know her name, Dad!"

"And what is that?" He asked with a big smile on his face. He loved seeing her so happy.

"Snowball!"

6. Chapter 6- Hopper

Many thanks to all of you who are reading and reviewing!

"Dad, what's a load?"

Hopper looked over the newspaper at Jane. "You mean, like, 'I hauled a load of firewood in my truck?'"

"Not sure," Jane said, holding up an old shoelace, which Snowball the kitten was chasing. Jane was sitting cross legged on the floor, happily playing with her new pet. Should have done this months ago, Hopper thought. Jane was completely enamored with the cat.

"Well, that's what it means. Something heavy or bulky."

Jane looked at him, scrutinizing him from head to toe, clearly studying him intently.

"Are you heavy or bulky?"

He sputtered into his coffee cup. "Hey!" he said, rubbing his belly. "I actually thought I had lost a few pounds recently. I'm a tall guy. I can carry some extra weight!"

Jane gave him a puzzled look and went on, "Mike said parents are a load. So, parents are heavy or bulky?"

He said what? Her dad thought to himself. He folded the newspaper, now giving her his undivided attention. This I've got to hear, he thought. "Tell me more about what Mike said."

She shrugged, unaware of why he was suddenly so interested. "Parents are a load. And rules are stupid. But you say we have rules because we're not stupid! I don't understand," she said, shaking her head, but still focusing on Snowball.

Hopper was livid but willed himself to keep his reaction in check. Is this what I have to deal with on an otherwise nice, peaceful Sunday afternoon? The little brat told her all that, did he now? I'll show him what a load parents can be.

"Come here a minute," he said, taking her hand and helping her up to stand next to him. She leaned into him, looking a bit worried she may have said something wrong.

"Parents make rules because we love you and want you to be safe. You know that," which was the most diplomatic way he could think to put it. Point to Dad, he thought. He wanted to tell her not to listen to another word Wheeler ever said, but he restrained himself.

She nodded, sitting on his lap. He scooted the chair back from the table to make more room. He could tell something was still on her mind. She looked at him, wide eyed.

"Mike said all kids our age break rules," she explained, "It's expected. That means it's supposed to happen."

Hopper brought a hand to his forehead and rubbed. Yep, definitely should have throttled that kid when I had the opportunity, no question about it. Or at least taped his mouth shut. I may not make it if I'm in for years of hearing "Mike said" multiple times a day in my own house. He took a deep breath.

"First of all, I know what expected means. Second, ALL kids don't break the rules. Third, if they do, there are consequences. I know you're well aware what that means."

She wrinkled her nose and frowned. "That means grounded. No TV."

"Yes, that's right. Mike got in trouble for breaking the rules too, so don't let him fool you with all his big talk about parents and rules. I talked to his mom and there were definitely consequences to his actions." And I just may be talking to him more about what he chooses to fill my daughter's head with. When I'm through, he will keep his opinions to himself.

"And YOU are not 'expected' to break rules, especially. We are slowly working on how best to take the next year. It's really only about nine months if we plan to have you start school in September. If I can't trust you to do what I say, it won't be a very enjoyable year for you. Or Mike." Boy needs to learn to keep his mouth closed, he mentally added.

She lay her head back against him, taking in his words. Snowball hopped up onto her lap, Jane stroking her while she purred. She had tied a bell around the cat's collar that was faintly jingling.

"Tell me, when did young Mr. Wheeler deliver this philosophy on regulations?" He asked, sarcastically. He knew she wouldn't know those words but he was curious when the manifesto according to Mike Wheeler had been shared with her. He saw her confused expression and changed how he phrased the question, "When did Mike tell you about rules being stupid and parents being a load?"

"Oh, one day before the dance. After you talked to us."

Uh huh, thought Hopper. After my explanation of following rules when it came to seeing Jane. He and I will be having a few more discussions before he's going to see my daughter again. He put his arms around her protectively and kissed the top of her head. Can't I just keep her here in our own sort of bubble, he sighed to himself, closing his eyes as if he were making a wish, knowing the answer. Her next question broke the quiet moment.

"Dad, can I have some money?"

That wasn't what he was expecting to hear but it was certainly easier than the previous topic had been. This, I can handle, he thought.

"That can probably be arranged," he said, though he could not imagine why she would need money, "Can you tell me the reason?"

"Christmas," was her reply.

"Keep going," he encouraged, wanting her to get out of the habit of one word answers.

She looked at him, gulped, and said, "Christmas presents," she lowered her gaze as if she were embarrassed and added, "For Mike. And you."

"You don't have to get me anything, honey. We can talk about getting something for Mike. I don't really want to take you to stores in public but if you tell me what you want to get him, I'll do the shopping." If that kid is lucky, he thought. Since parents are a 'load,' that is.

"Not the same," she pouted.

"That's the deal. I know you went to the Snow Ball and we are going to dinner at Mike's, but besides that, you need to be staying here. Dr. Owens said a year. I'm still thinking September, for school, like I told you. In the time between now and then, I'm going to allow supervised visits with your friends, so they can help you get ready. Baby steps."

She looked offended and retorted, "Not a baby!"

"I know you're not," he explained with a chuckle. "It's an expression. It means taking things in small steps. But going Christmas shopping in crowded stores doesn't fall into that plan."

"Don't know what to get Mike," she said sadly.

"That's ok. You've got some time before Christmas. You'll think of something."

It occurred to Hopper that far too many of their conversations centered around that boy, a fact that was not likely to change in the foreseeable future. And they were just at the beginning of adolescence. We still have dating and school and goodness knows what else. He patted her leg and motioned for her to get off his lap. He went to the sink, rinsed out his coffee cup and went to the refrigerator for a beer. Popping it open, he thought that children should most definitely come with instructions.

7. Chapter 7- Mike

On Monday morning, Jim Hopper got ready for work a little earlier than usual. He had a stop to make before going to the police station, having already phoned Karen Wheeler. She and her husband fully supported his idea. An important mission, he was thinking as he pinned on his badge and poured a cup of coffee for the road. Putting on his hat, he called, "Jane! Are you awake? I'm leaving soon!"

He heard her bedroom door open and a disheveled figure with wild brown curls emerged, bleary eyed in pink pajamas, with a white kitten at her heels. She went to the stove and saw a small pot of oatmeal which was clearly meant to be her breakfast. She looked at Hopper and asked hopefully, "Eggos?"

"Eat that first then you can have an Eggo or two. No oatmeal, no Eggos. And have orange juice or milk with it."

She turned her back to get a bowl from the cabinet and rolled her eyes where he couldn't see. He was gathering his keys and wallet as she spooned her breakfast into the bowl. She sprinkled some sugar on it quickly before he could notice and tell her no.

"I do have some good news for you, kid. You can watch TV. You went all weekend without it and didn't complain. Much. I figure you served your time."

She perked up at that and looked at him with excitement, saying, "TV! Thanks, Dad!"

"You're welcome, honey. You can introduce Snowball to the wonders of game shows and soap operas," he said, giving Jane a quick goodbye kiss on her forehead and walking out the door.

Hopper arrived at his destination five minutes ahead of schedule. He pulled up in front of the house and waited. Just inside the door, Mike Wheeler was looking at his mother like she had sprouted a second head.

"He's driving me to school? Haven't I been punished enough? I'm still coughing from all the dust in the garage!" Mike yelled. He couldn't believe what was happening.

"Don't talk to your mother like that," came his father's voice from the kitchen.

Mike forced his voice lower and looked at his mother with pleading eyes, "Please, Mom. You can make me clean something else, or take away my bike until high school. Anything but this!"

"Stop being so dramatic," his mom replied. "This isn't punishment. Chief Hopper just wants to talk to you."

"Talk?" Mike felt like he was begging for his life now. How could he make her see the gravity of the situation? "Mom, the man is armed. Do you realize he could kill me and hide the body and no one would ever find me? Don't you care about your only son?"

His little sister Holly had been sitting on the steps, holding her blanket and watching the whole interaction as if it were a movie. Suddenly, she burst into tears and wailed, "I don't want Mikey to die!"

Mrs. Wheeler gave Mike an exasperated look and went to comfort Holly, "No one is going to die. Mike is just going to school, like any other day. Now, Michael, see what you've done?"

Mike saw an opportunity here. "Holly, tell Mommy not to make me get in the bad man's truck!"

At that, his dad appeared around the corner. He put an end to the discussion, saying pointedly to Mike, "That's enough. Get going now, young man. You're keeping Chief Hopper waiting and you're frightening your sister."

Mike roughly grabbed his jacket from his mom, picked up his backpack with a huff and turned toward the door. "Goodbye, world," he mumbled.

"What was that?" asked his father, looking sternly at Mike's retreating figure.

"Oh, nothing," answered Mike. Just being sent to my doom by my own parents. Maybe I should radio Dustin, Will, and Lucas, to tell them bye, he thought. Or ask them to send out a search party if I don't turn up at school.

He trudged toward Hopper's truck. The chief was strangely cheerful when Mike opened the door and climbed in.

"Good morning! Beautiful day, isn't it?" Hopper remarked in a voice so chipper, Mike began to seriously fear he was in an alternate dimension. What is even happening, he thought. He stared in disbelief.

"Seat belt, son! Safety first!" Mike obeyed, though in shock, and still pondering if the chief's plan was to somehow end his life.

The truck started down the road and Hopper asked, "So, how was your weekend? Bummer about having to clean your garage."

Did Chief Hopper really just use the word 'bummer', thought Mike. Maybe I'm having a weird dream. Should I pinch myself? Is he about to drive me off a cliff? At this point, nothing would surprise me.

Hopper continued, "Yeah, I hate that for you. I know it's rough. You get in trouble, you get punished. It sucks."

First, 'bummer', now 'sucks.' Mike began to contemplate just how dangerous it would be to jump out of a moving vehicle. I'm trapped in here with a crazy person, he thought. Maybe I could make a run for it at the next stop light. The chief was still talking.

"Ugh. Parents. They're a LOAD."

On the last word, the truck came to an abrupt stop so suddenly that the seat belt prevented Mike from lurching forward.

Oh, crap, thought Mike, rubbing his shoulder under the seat belt. So that's what this is about. He's definitely going to kill me. They had pulled to the side of the road, about a mile from school. Well, this is where it happens. Why did I tell Jane that? I signed my own death sentence.

Mike took a quick glance to his left. Hopper didn't look too insane, an observation that made him feel a little better about his fate. He also didn't look happy, either.

"Ok, enough beating around the bush. You and I are going to have a discussion. And you are going to listen to what I'm saying and not give me any attitude." Mike swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly feeling very dry.

"Will you please let me in on the reason you would tell Jane all that bull you told her? That parents are a load and rules are stupid?"

For the second time in three days, Mike found himself faced with questions he wasn't sure he was supposed to answer. For lack of a better option, he stared silently at Hopper, eyes wide and jaw open. There was a pit in his stomach and he felt like he would throw up if he started talking. All the color had drained from his face.

Hopper felt pretty pleased with the ride so far. Kid looks like he's about to vomit, he mentally congratulated himself. At least the first part of his operation was successful. He had put the fear of God in the boy. Now to move on to phase two. He decided to take a little pity on the the pale figure next to him.

"When did I become the enemy?" He asked Mike, genuinely wanting to know.

"Last year, you kids really impressed me," Hopper resumed, when Mike didn't answer. He hadn't really expected him to. "We fought some nasty stuff together, the things of nightmares. And I know you thought Jane was gone after all that."

Mike spoke for the first time since getting in the truck. His eyes were looking down at his lap, and his voice was quiet.

"You kept her from us. From me."

Hopper sighed, though he wasn't surprised. He knew that was coming.

"Mike," he explained, "I had to. To keep her safe. Surely you can understand that. Think for a minute. What would have happened if

I'd paraded her out into town, with those bastards from the lab still looking for her?"

"I know, but that doesn't make it any easier. You had a whole year with her. And I didn't."

This kid has it bad, thought Hopper. For my daughter. Time to get us on the same side.

"Here's the thing. Jane is painfully honest, right? Friends don't lie, right?"

Mike nodded, thinking, you lied when you hid her from me. But he kept listening.

"So if you have a brain, you'll realize you can't say or do anything to her a girl can't tell her father. Sneaking out of the gym, telling her to break rules and not listen to me, that crap isn't going to work with her."

"Why?" Mike felt suddenly brazen. "Because you make the rules?"

Hopper was determined to explain this without getting angry.

"Yes, I do make the rules when it comes to Jane. But that's not the only reason. You are your own worst enemy, not me. She needs consistency. And honesty. Don't you think she deserves that? After all she's been through in her life?"

Mike looked at Hopper for the first time, a light bulb going off in his head. He did understand what the chief was saying, finally.

"Yes, sir," he answered honestly.

A breakthrough, thought Hopper. Time to reel him in.

"When you tell her to break rules, it puts her at risk. And it confuses her. I know you want what's best for her. I know you care about her. I'm not an idiot. But it's up to me to be sure she's happy and healthy and most importantly, protected. Not you. And if you're working against me, you won't be seeing her. It's as simple as that."

"I'm sorry," Mike said quietly. "I'll do what you say, I'll follow your rules. Promise. Just please, let me see her?"

"Sure, as long as it's within the guidelines I set. I think we've reached an understanding here, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, sir," Mike responded. That wasn't so bad, he thought.

"And just to be clear, if you try to undermine me again, I'll cut you off at the knees. If you do anything to hurt Jane, I'll cut you off a little higher. Got me?"

"Uh-huh, I mean, uh, yes, sir," Mike stuttered, looking scared, clearing his throat to keep his voice from cracking. Okay, it's getting bad again.

"I'm not going to hurt her. Ever," Mike added.

"Glad to hear it. While we're clearing the air," Hopper continued, "Keep the physical stuff to a minimum. A bare minimum. Better yet, just keep your hands to yourself. Remember, she tells me everything. Even when I don't ask. Even when I really don't want to know. So if I were you, I wouldn't do anything you don't want her telling me. Do you understand?"

Mike's face blushed scarlet red and he looked out the window, not trusting himself to make eye contact and speak a response to that.

He nodded, but Hopper wanted to be sure he drove this point home. He repeated himself a bit louder, still keeping his voice even.

"I said, do you understand?"

Mike took a deep breath before mumbling, "Yes, sir, I understand." Jumping out of the truck was looking better and better, if this conversation continues, he thought.

Hopper merely said, "Good," clearly pleased. Kid is being respectful and I think we are on the same page. Mission accomplished. This had been a successful endeavor. Point to Hopper.

"Um, Chief?" Mike ventured to ask nervously, "Are you going to tell

my mom what I said? About parents? I'm really sorry..."

Hopper laughed a little. "Naw, I don't think your mom needs to hear about that. Since you and I understand each other now, man to man."

The truck was moving down the road again, and came to a stop in front of Hawkins Middle School.

"It's been great talking to you this morning," Hopper said happily, patting Mike's leg. For his part, Mike still looked like a deer in the headlights, though the color was slowly coming back to his face. He took a few deep breaths.

"Um, yes, sure, it's been, uh, great, like you said," Mike muttered. I'm still alive, he reassured himself. At least I got that going for me.

"So, can I go now?" Mike asked cautiously. He saw his friends standing in front of the school, their jaws gaped open at the sight of Hopper's truck and who was in it.

"You bet. Have a good day!" Cheerful Hopper was back. Mike could not get out of the truck fast enough. He ran to his friends. Ah, freedom.

Dustin was the first to speak. "Dude, what the hell?" Were you arrested?!"

Lucas smacked Dustin's arm. "Of course not, you idiot!"

Will asked seriously, "Mike, why did Chief Hopper bring you to school? You must be in some big trouble!"

"Calm down, guys," Mike explained, "I thought I may die this morning but it turns out he just wanted to talk. And I lived, thankfully."

The four of them turned and headed into the school.

"You must really like Jane, brother," said Dustin, patting Mike's shoulder and shaking his head, as they walked to their first class.

8. Chapter 8- Jane

Thank you to everyone who is reading and reviewing!

Jane looked closely at her reflection in the mirror. She had brushed her teeth and redone her hair, repeatedly trying her best to tame the curls, and finally settled for a clip to keep them swept to the side. "Pretty?" she asked herself. Snowball gave a meow from her spot, perched on the bathroom counter. Jane took that as a note of approval. She scooped up the kitten and put on a little lip gloss, a gift from Nancy before the Snow Ball dance. She puckered her lips in the mirror and glanced at the kitten, who once again gave a purr of support.

Jane smoothed out her pink sweater, and turned around in the mirror, checking that her jeans looked alright. Her stomach felt odd, fluttery. Oh yes, butterflies, she remembered, reminding herself that the expression did not mean she had actual butterflies in her stomach. It just felt like it. Butterflies, because tonight, she and her dad were going to dinner at Mike's. She smiled just thinking about seeing Mike. She studied herself in the mirror and rehearsed some of the lessons on manners her dad had been drilling into her head lately. "Nice to meet you. Yes, please. No, thank you. Yes, ma'am." She heard the secret knock, and she ran to open the door, slamming into her dad in the process.

"Whoa, slow down!" Hopper said, taking off his hat and stopping Jane. "Where's the fire?"

"Fire?!" She responded, looking around frantically.

"No, there's no fire, kid. It just means why are you in such a hurry."

She looked at him with an expression of clear disapproval.

"Scared me," she said, crossing her arms and scowling at him.

He reached out and hugged her, "I'm sorry, Janie. I didn't mean to scare you."

She looked up at him, her features softening. "Time for Mike's house!" She said brightly.

"Not quite," Hopper explained. "But soon, yes. Let me get out of the cop clothes and take a quick shower. "

Jane huffed, clearly put out by this delay. She pointed to the clock, saying, "Dinner at six-three-zero."

"Yes," he called from his bedroom, "And we will be there at 6:30. It's rude to show up early."

Jane heard the water running and flopped down on the couch, Snowball settling on her lap. She tilted her head to change the TV channels, growing more impatient. Nothing on but news. "Boring," she said to Snowball, who was snuggling into her fuzzy sweater. After what seemed to her like forever, her dad appeared, wearing a button down shirt and khakis, his hair still a bit wet.

"Wow, Dad! Handsome!" She exclaimed, then sniffing the air, she added, "Smell good too!"

"Thank you," he replied, "I do clean up every now and then. You look very nice too," he added with a wink, reaching out to ruffle her hair. She ducked away from his hand.

"No, Dad!"

"Oh, excuse me," he said, bowing deeply, "Forgive me for almost touching milady's hair." She giggled.

"Um, Dad?" She asked cautiously.

"Yes?" He asked, going to the refrigerator to retrieve the bottle of wine he'd gotten to take to the Wheelers'. As he had told Jane, it was rude to show up at someone's house empty handed. She was starting to think there were too many things that were rude for her to ever remember them all.

"Snowball wants to come."

"What?" He asked, making sure he had heard that correctly. He was

holding the bottle of wine, thankful he hadn't dropped it at her statement.

"Scared to be alone," Jane replied, holding the kitten close.

"Please?" She added in a hopeful tone.

He had to answer with no room for interpretation. We don't have time for an argument, he thought.

"Absolutely not. You can't go to someone's house for dinner with an animal in tow."

"Why not?"

Hopper sighed, bringing a hand to his forehead and rubbing. "You just don't, Jane."

She frowned at him. "Not a reason."

Please don't let this escalate, Hopper silently prayed. I've got to make her understand what she wants is not happening. And I don't have time for things to start breaking or doors to start slamming.

"Honey, it's a firm no. Cats are not invited to dinner. It would very rude and impolite. Snowball will be fine here. We won't even be gone that long. We can leave the TV on to keep her company," he was holding her coat and opening the door. "Now, it's time to go. We have to pick up Joyce. You don't want to be late, do you?"

She shook her head and answered, "No, sir," then she added, "I can do manners, see?"

"Yes, that was very nice manners," he complimented her with a proud smile.

"Been practicing," she said, clearly pleased with herself.

She gave Snowball one last hug, "Sorry, you can't come," she told her sadly, putting the kitten on the couch and slipping on her coat.

Whew, crisis averted, thought Hopper. Now if the rest of this evening

would go smoothly.

When they pulled in at the Byers' home, Joyce was waiting at the door. She too had changed out of work clothes, looking nice in a red sweater and denim skirt. Jane scooted over in the truck, waving to Will and Jonathan, who had said bye to their mom on the front step.

"Don't you two look spiffy," Joyce complimented as she buckled her seat belt.

"Snowball had to stay home. She wanted to come. It was a firm no," Jane said matter of factly. "That would be rude. It's also rude to say you don't like the vegetables and be early. Or late. Lots of rules for dinner."

"Well, thank you for telling me," Joyce said kindly, wondering who the heck Snowball was. "I'll do my best to remember."

Hopper coughed, disguising that he was trying not to laugh.

"And say please and thank you and no using powers," Jane continued to explain.

"I see," Joyce replied, managing not to chuckle. "Anything else?"

"It's rude not to take a present," Jane said, pointing to the bottle of wine wedged between her and Hopper. "But that's not for me. Or Mike. Anything else, Dad?"

"I think you've about covered it, kid. Glad to know you've been listening to me."

Joyce put her arm around Jane, saying, "Don't be nervous; just be your usual sweet self. Everything will be fine."

They arrived at the Wheelers' right at 6:30. Walking to the door, Jane slipped her hand into her dad's. The butterflies were back in her stomach. As Joyce rang the doorbell, Jane stood behind Hopper a bit, feeling anxious. He squeezed her hand reassuringly.

Mrs. Wheeler opened the door and greeted them all warmly,

"It's lovely to meet you, Jane. Mike has told us so much about you."

Jane returned her smile as she emerged from behind her dad. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Wheeler," she said, just as she had practiced.

"Mom, you're already embarrassing me," Mike said, appearing in the doorway. A huge grin spread across his face when he saw Jane.

"Hi, Mike," Jane said, her face beaming.

"Mike, let them come inside. They're standing in the cold."

Holly Wheeler came around the corner and upon seeing Hopper's truck, she yelled, "That's the bad man that was going to kill Mikey!"

Mike felt his heart plummet into his stomach. He closed his eyes, hoping when he opened them, the last few seconds maybe hadn't happened. Nope, no such luck. He wanted to crawl away. His mom broke the tension, picking up her youngest and saying,

"Holly, don't be ridiculous, honey. This is Mike's friend Jane and her dad, Chief Hopper, and our other friend Mrs. Byers."

Holly buried her head in her mother's shoulder. "Mikey said bad man's truck," she cried. Obviously the little girl clearly remembered the events of two days prior.

"Nancy!" Called Mrs. Wheeler, "Will you please take Holly to play for a few minutes? Dinner is almost ready," and she added under her breath, "For God's sake, see if you can convince her the chief isn't going to kill your brother."

Nancy came from the living room and said, "Sure, Mom," taking Holly and quickly retreating.

Mike's father entered the foyer, shaking hands with Hopper, then Joyce. He turned to Jane, giving her a somewhat uncomfortable, "Hello." Hopper nudged Jane slightly, indicating she was supposed to reply.

She cleared her throat and said in a shaky voice, "Nice to meet you, Mr. Wheeler."

"Jane, you are so polite!" Mrs. Wheeler said, smiling at Jane, "Mike, you could learn a thing or two from your friend."

Mike happened to think his manners were just fine though he figured Chief Hopper would disagree. He had yet to greet the man or make eye contact. Why does he spook me so much, he thought. Oh, maybe because he controls when and if I see Jane. And I've screwed up lately in that department. He decided a little kissing up was never a bad thing.

Mike gathered up his courage, extended his hand to Jane's dad and said, "Nice to see you again, Chief Hopper."

"Well, I stand corrected!" His mother gushed.

Hopper returned Mike's handshake but remained silent. Can't let the boy think I'm going soft, he thought.

"Mom, can I show Jane my room?" Mike could not wait to get away from all of the adults, even just for a few minutes. Jane had seen his room before but no one else knew that.

Hopper's eyebrows shot up and he turned to Mike. This kid has some guts, or a death wish, he thought. We've been here less than five minutes and he's wanting to get my daughter alone in his room.

"Is that alright with you, Chief?" Mrs. Wheeler asked before adding, "All doors remain open of course, Mike. You can give Jane a tour of the house while the grown ups talk."

Joyce looked at Hopper and subtly nodded, signaling her approval.

"I guess that would be okay," Hopper said, not sounding too convinced.

That's all the affirmation Mike needed. He said hurriedly, "Come on, Jane," resisting the urge to hold her hand. He lead the way upstairs, feeling her dad's eyes burrowing into him as he took the steps two at a time, Jane right with him.

He grabbed her hand as soon as they were out of sight of their parents, and pulled her into his bedroom. He was sure to leave the

door open. She giggled and threw her arms around him in a bone crushing hug. He held her close, and kissed the top of her head.

"Missed you," she said, her arms still wrapped around his body. When she raised her head to look up at him, he glanced in the hallway and seeing they were alone upstairs, placed a quick kiss on her lips. She tastes like cherries, he thought. He could have kept kissing her all night but he reluctantly removed her arms from around him.

"I've missed you so much," he said, holding her hands and staring at her. Was the Snow Ball really only last Friday? It felt like ages since he had seen her. "You look really pretty tonight."

She blushed and replied, "Thank you. Glad we came to dinner. Dad had lots of rules. Snowball had to stay home."

Mike looked confused. "Snowball?"

"My new kitten! Christmas present from my dad. She's white. And soft."

"That's great! I hope I can see her sometime."

Just then, Nancy and Holly walked by and paused at the door to Mike's room.

"Be careful, little brother. You don't want any of the parents seeing you two like that," Nancy warned, pointing to Mike and Jane's still joined hands.

"Ugh, we aren't doing anything," Mike said, clearly annoyed at the interruption. Jane pulled her hands out of his.

"I know, I know," Nancy explained. "Look, I don't care if you two hold hands. I'm just trying to help you out. You don't want to get in anymore trouble."

"No more trouble, Mike," Jane agreed, shaking her head. "No more consequences. Don't like being grounded. Want to be able to see you."

"Your girlfriend is smart, kiddo," Nancy said, taking Holly's hand and turning to go downstairs.

"Girlfriend?" Jane asked.

I'm going to kill Nancy, Mike thought.

9. Chapter 9- Dinner

Thank you to everyone for reading, following, favoriting, and most of all, reviewing! Happy New Year :)

I'm going to kill Nancy, Mike thought.

As if on cue, she stuck her head in his room one last time, saying, "You may want to wipe off that lip gloss before you come downstairs, little brother. Or don't. Your funeral."

Mike's hand immediately went to his mouth, rubbing off the remnants of Jane's cherry lip gloss.

"Girlfriend?" Jane asked again. She's not going to let that go, Mike thought. Attacking his sister seemed like a better option than having this discussion at the moment. His eyes widened as he regarded Jane, a look of expectation on her face. It was obvious she was wanting him to clarify what Nancy meant. Mike rubbed the back of his neck, fumbling for a response. His mouth felt too dry to speak. Why has that word turned me into a bumbling idiot, he chastised himself.

"Uh, don't worry about that," he somehow managed to articulate, "We probably should be getting downstairs. Don't want the parents to come looking for us..." His voice trailed off, his attention focused intently on his shoes.

Jane's eyes found the floor too, wondering what was down there that was so interesting. She looked back up at Mike, her face etched with confusion.

Okay, Wheeler, he told himself. Be a man. He inhaled a deep breath and lifted his gaze to meet hers. Her eyes are amazing, he found himself thinking. Focus, he told himself, shaking his head to clear his brain. Her eyes had not budged from his face, looking at him expectantly.

"Do you know what a girlfriend is? And a boyfriend?" He asked her cautiously.

"I think so," she answered. "But tell me. Just to be sure."

She's going to make me explain it, his internal dialogue continued. You've gone this far. No stopping now.

"A girlfriend and boyfriend are, uh, dating. It's like that's your favorite person to be with. Like they go out on dates to the movies or whatever."

She nodded, taking in the information and pondering it.

"And go to dances?"

"Yes!" He blurted out, surprised at his own reaction. He was so relieved he didn't have to clarify anymore. At least she knows what it means.

"And, kiss?" Jane asked, quietly.

At that, he simply nodded.

"Then I'm your girlfriend! You're my boyfriend. You're my favorite to be with!" she said, her voice full of excitement and happiness.

Even though he had promised her dad complete honesty, he had to break his pledge, just this once, because he valued his life. And he didn't want to jeopardize being able to see her again. If her dad knew what they were discussing, he may cut Mike off.

"Hey," he said, "Don't tell your dad that I'm your boyfriend, ok? I mean, he probably already knows. But he may get mad if you tell him. And we don't want him mad at us." Knowing it and hearing it from his daughter's mouth are two different things.

"We don't want that," she agreed, nodding vigorously.

"We should go back down, before anyone starts looking for us," he said reluctantly. They made their way to the top of the stairs, but Mike stopped them when he heard the adults' conversation. He heard Jane's name. He put his finger to his lips, and whispered, "Let's listen. Just for a second." She nodded.

"Jane seems like a lovely girl," Mrs. Wheeler was saying. "It breaks my heart to think what she's been through."

"I appreciate your understanding," Hopper replied. "It probably sounds overprotective that I can't put her in school just yet. There could still be some, um, bad influences from her past looking for her. It's complicated. I can't go into details."

"No need," Mike's mom said kindly.

"Plus, she has a lot of catching up to do," Hopper continued, the concern showing on his face. "A lot to learn. She's never been to school. I'm actually hoping Mike and his friends can help with that."

Mike and Jane perked up, making eye contact and smiling. That meant they could see each other.

"Of course," Mrs. Wheeler said. "I hardly think it will be a chore for Mike to spend time with your daughter. I'd say he would welcome the opportunity."

Mike rolled his eyes and whispered, "God, Mom..." Jane quietly giggled, covering her mouth.

Hopper went on, "I was thinking maybe once a week tutoring sessions? I am going to be homeschooling her too but I can't teach her everything. And for her protection, the tutoring sessions with the kids will have to be at my place. At least to start with. I hope that's okay. It's not safe for her to be out in public just yet."

Joyce interjected, "I can speak for Will that he would love to help. I'm sure Dustin and Lucas would too. They all think the world of Jane."

Ted Wheeler cleared his throat, apparently feeling like he should be part of the conversation. He said stiffly, "Happy to assist a fellow patriot, Chief Hopper."

"Thank you," Hopper said, feeling relieved the conversation had gone well. He had been afraid the Wheelers would have more questions. If they did, they were too polite or felt too sorry for Jane to ask. "The kids can help Jane socially too. She's never really been around peers her age before."

"Poor thing," Mrs. Wheeler said sympathetically, taking a sip from her wine glass. A buzzer from the kitchen sounded, stopping the conversation. "Oh, that means dinner is ready. Now, where are Jane and Mike...Michael!"

Why does she have to use my whole name, makes me feel five years old, Mike thought. At least she didn't say "Michael Edward Wheeler." He would have died.

He lead Jane down the stairs, hurrying so his mother didn't have a reason to yell his name again.

"Ah, here they are," Joyce said, taking Jane's hand. "Dinner is ready. And it smells wonderful, Karen."

Hopper eyed Mike suspiciously and put his arm protectively around Jane. "Doing okay, honey?" he asked her as they walked to the dining room table.

"Yes, Dad," she answered, beaming.

"Mom, Jane can sit by me," Mike offered. Big surprise, thought Hopper.

Mike showed Jane to her chair, then sat down himself. His mom and Nancy were bringing the food to the table. Jane was delighting in the scene unfolding before her, having never been at a real family dinner. A huge smile was on her face, with a little nervousness behind it. Everyone was talking and laughing, the adults filling glasses and placing dinner on the table. Mike, Jane, Holly, and Nancy were at one end of the table, the adults at the other end. Mrs. Wheeler cut Holly's meat into little pieces before putting her plate in front of her and patting her head. Chief Hopper and Mr. Wheeler were making small talk about football.

This is family, Jane thought.

"Jane, would you like milk or water?" Mrs. Wheeler asked.

Jane swallowed, remembering the lessons on manners and answered, "Milk, please."

Hopper gave her a smile of approval and a wink. He helped fill Jane's plate with roast beef, potatoes, and green beans. She quickly glanced at the vegetables, then at her dad, who gave her a nod, indicating she was expected to eat them.

"What is Santa bringing you?" Holly asked Jane, once everyone was seated and eating. "I want a Barbie dream house. It's pink."

Jane had no idea what Holly was talking about. Her eyes grew big and she started to panic, not knowing at all how to respond. This was not a topic they had practiced. Mike quickly squeezed Jane's hand under the table as silent reassurance. He had her back.

"Hey, Holly, you know what? Chief Hopper gave Jane an early Christmas present. Tell Holly what it was, Jane," Mike suggested, deflecting the Santa question.

Jane took his lead and said eagerly, "I got a kitten. She's white. I named her Snowball."

Mike decided that if he kept talking, Holly would probably forget what she had originally asked Jane. At least he hoped so.

"I want some games, and maybe a new bike, and I've always thought I may want to learn to ride a skateboard, oh and comic books, and definitely some good candy in my stocking..." Mike babbled.

His mother looked at him with a surprised expression, setting down her knife and fork briefly and said, "Wow, Mike, that's quite a list."

Mike shrugged, pleased that his tactic seemed to have worked. He made a mental note to talk to Jane later about Santa. That will be an interesting conversation, he thought to himself.

"I'd love to see your kitten, Jane," Nancy said. "She sounds so cute!"

"She wanted to come tonight. But it was a firm no." Jane replied in complete seriousness, making a point of taking a bite of green beans while her dad was watching.

Mrs. Wheeler laughed, clearly thinking Jane was making a joke.

Hopper choked into his wine glass, sending him into a coughing fit. Joyce smacked him on the back until it passed. He drained his water glass, regaining his composure.

"I'm allergic to cats," said Mr. Wheeler with a frown.

Jane didn't know what that meant either but she didn't ask. She thought that asking may be rude, according to her dad.

After dinner, Jane wandered into the living room, drawn to their Christmas tree like a magnet. It was full and green with beautiful twinkling lights and colorful decorations. She stared at it in awe. Mike stared too, though he was watching her, not the tree. She reached out to touch it cautiously, as if she were afraid it would break or disappear. Her fingers moved lightly over the branches.

"Don't you have a Christmas tree?" He asked her. She shook her head, not moving her gaze from the tree. Mike chanced a glare at Hopper. The adults were still at the table, drinking coffee and talking. Joyce caught Mike's look and playfully hit Hopper's arm.

"Hop! You don't have a Christmas tree?! Look at Jane! She needs one. Christmas is next week, you know."

"Yes, thank you, I am aware of the date, Joyce," he replied, suddenly feeling everyone's eyes on him. "I am going to get one, of course. I just didn't want to get it too soon. They dry out. Fire hazard."

"Dad! We can get one?" Jane asked from the other room.

"I planned to do that tomorrow, honey!" He called back, chugging the rest of his coffee. "Oh, look at the time. We need to be getting home. Karen, Ted, I can't thank you enough for everything." He got up and pushed in his chair.

The Wheelers rose also, shaking his hand. "It was our pleasure," Mrs. Wheeler said. "Let us know when you want Mike to start helping Jane with school work. Also, you're welcome to come to dinner anytime."

Hopper and Joyce walked into the living room, signaling to Jane it was time to leave.

She looked sadly at Mike, "It's time to go."

"Bye, Jane," Mike said, hoping his voice didn't crack. "Can I see you again soon?"

Mike was tentatively looking at Hopper, who was feeling generous.

"Don't worry, kids. I'm not going to keep you two apart. Like I've told you both. Follow the rules and everyone stays happy."

"Thank you, Chief Hopper," said Mike, visibly relieved.

"Jane, what do you say to Mike's parents?" Hopper asked, helping Joyce on with her coat.

"Thank you for dinner." Jane replied politely.

Mike's mom gave her and Joyce a hug goodbye. Mike watched from the door as they walked to Hopper's truck, wondering if it would ever get easier to say goodbye to Jane.

In the truck, Jane snuggled close to her dad for warmth. Joyce put an arm around her, and said, "You did great tonight, sweetie."

Jane glowed with pride. She had remembered all of her manners and she had gotten to see Mike. That was a perfect night in her book.

"Thank you, Joy-, um, I mean Mrs. Byers".

"You can call me Joyce. Goodness knows I'm not married to 'Mr. Byers' anymore, Thank God," she answered with a smile.

Jane wasn't sure about that so she asked, "Dad? Is it okay?"

Hopper was in such a good mood, he would have agreed to almost anything.

"Sure, that's fine. I don't want you to get in the habit of calling adults by their first name but this is different."

"Different?" Jane asked, confused. Joyce is an adult so how is it different, she pondered to herself.

"Well, yeah. You know, she's like family."

"Family? Like Mike and his parents and sisters?"

Joyce didn't even try to hide her laughter. Let's see you dig yourself out of this one, Hopper.

He was clearly unsure of what to say. "Well, not exactly like that," he said, stumbling over his words.

Thankfully for him, they had arrived at Joyce's house. He got out to walk her to the door.

Giving her a hug, he said, "Thank you again for coming."

"So, tell me, did you really plan on getting a Christmas tree tomorrow?" She asked, quirked an eyebrow at him.

"Of course!" Then he collapsed into laughter. He couldn't even convince himself that was true.

"Want me to come by after work? Help with the decorating? For Jane, you know."

"Would you?" He asked, visibly relieved.

"I'll be there. You bring the tree."

He embraced her again, placing a kiss on her cheek. I wish it was more, he caught himself thinking. No, Hopper, no time for that. Back to reality.

The look in her eyes told him she also wished that kiss had been more. "Since we're almost like family, after all."

She pulled herself out of his arms, reluctantly. "You'd better get Jane home."

He nodded, turning and walking to his truck. When he got in, Jane looked at him.

"Dad?"

"Um hmm?" He responded, still thinking how nice Joyce felt in his arms.

"Is Joyce your girlfriend?"

10. Chapter 10- Jane

Hopper lit a cigarette and cracked the window a little to blow the smoke out. He was driving to work on Thursday morning, replaying the events of the previous night in his head. His daughter had actually asked if Joyce was his girlfriend. Jane, with all her curiosity and endless questions. If it came into her head, it came out in the form of a question. He loved her child-like innocence, but it was also frustrating at times. She's trying so hard to figure out people and relationships, he thought. I probably didn't help last night. She's so literal, it's tricky to explain a lot of things to her.

What was I supposed to say, though. How could I answer when I wasn't sure myself, he asked himself, remembering the conversation.

"Is Joyce your girlfriend?"

"How do you even know what that means, hmm?" He asked. Point to Hopper, he thought. Way to avoid the question.

Jane shrugged, "Just know. Is Joyce your girlfriend?"

Dang it, he told himself. She probably knows that word from movies and TV. Point to Jane.

"No, of course not. Definitely not," he had replied, emphatically. There, asked and answered.

"You hugged. And kissed," Jane noted.

I'm going to have to do a better job of monitoring what she watches. She knows a bit too much.

"I gave her a friendly hug," he explained, suddenly feeling like the truck was getting warm.

"And a kiss," Jane added.

He let out an exasperated breath. "A quick kiss on the cheek doesn't mean she's my girlfriend. We are just friends."

"You said she's like family."

He sighed deeply, wanting this conversation to be over.

"That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean?"

"Good God, honey, just drop it, okay?" He said, in a sharp and aggravated tone.

He regretted his response the second the words were out of his mouth. Jane recoiled, looking stung. She nodded and looked timid. I've scared her, he thought to himself. Way to go, Dad. He immediately apologized.

Reaching for her hand, he said, "I'm sorry kid. I shouldn't have snapped at you."

"It's okay," she said softly, her eyes on her lap. She still looked hurt.

"No, it's not," he said, squeezing her hand. "I wasn't sure how to answer your questions. Grown up relationships can be complicated. Do you know what that means?"

She shook her head. He was not going to scold her for not using words now. Not after practically biting her head off.

"It means something that's hard to explain. Complicated means difficult, not easy."

She nodded, taking in his words. He could tell she was processing the information, trying to make sense of it. Good luck, kid, he thought. If you can figure out the secret to relationships, you'll be way ahead of me.

"You and Joyce are not easy. Got it."

He laughed a little. "I guess that's one way to look at it." He kept his hand on hers.

Grown up relationships are indeed rarely easy, he thought. I

explained that much right. I have an ex-wife, she has an ex-husband, and a boyfriend she recently lost in a horrific way. We're both single parents with kids to focus on. Definitely not easy.

The rest of the ride home had been spent in comfortable silence, though Hopper still felt bad. He'd tucked her in bed and read some of A Christmas Carol to her before she fell asleep.

That morning, he'd promised her he would be home from work early, Christmas tree in hand.

He kept that promise, leaving the station at 5:00 and stopping by a Christmas tree lot on the way home. It was a little after 5:30 when he arrived at the cabin. When Jane saw him drag the tree out of the back of his truck, she squealed with delight.

"Christmas tree!" she yelled, holding the door of the cabin open so he could bring it in.

"Sure is," he said, out of breath. It had been years since he's done this and he'd forgotten how cumbersome it was.

"A load, right? Heavy and bulky," she observed.

"You said it, kid," he replied, propping the tree against the corner of the living room and heading back out to his truck to get the stand and decorations.

"Knock, knock," came a cheerful voice, followed by another saying, "Hey, El, oops, I mean Jane!"

Joyce and Will were walking up the steps to the cabin. Will was carrying a box of lights and ornaments, with two pizza boxes balanced on top.

"We brought dinner! I hope it's alright that I brought Will. Jonathan is studying for exams with Nancy at the Wheelers' house and I didn't want to leave Will home by himself."

Will rolled his eyes but smiled at Jane.

"Of course, that's fine," Hopper said amiably, entering the cabin with

more decorations.

"Will!" Jane threw her arms around him, thrilled at getting to see one of her friends.

"How are you?" Will asked kindly. Seeing that his mom and Hopper were busy trying to get the tree into the stand, he dropped his voice and said so only Jane could hear, "So, you went to Mike's house last night."

Jane nodded and whispered, "We had dinner! And Mike is my boyfriend. But don't tell my dad."

Will laughed quietly and whispered back, "Um, no, I wouldn't tell your dad that."

"What are you two over there giggling about?" Joyce asked in mock seriousness.

"Mom," Will said, embarrassed, "I'm a guy. I don't giggle."

"That's what it sounded like to me," Joyce said, winking. "Anyway, come over here and help. This tree isn't going to decorate itself."

Snowball had emerged from Jane's room and was making her way to where the tree was being secured in the stand, curious to see what the commotion was about.

"This is Snowball!" Jane announced cheerfully, scooping her up to show Joyce and Will.

Joyce reached out and took the kitten, holding her and saying, "Wow, Hop, you're really going soft. A kitten AND a Christmas tree? Guess I can't call you Scrooge anymore," playfully slapping his arm.

"Hey! Shut up! My dad is NOT Scrooge!" Jane practically yelled, leveling Joyce with a deathly stare. Her forceful statement and raised voice took everyone by shock. Will's mouth dropped open. Joyce looked surprised.

Hopper was the first to speak, showing his disapproval.

Frowning, he said, "Jane! You don't talk to an adult like that. Apologize." Seeing her make no movement to obey him, he added, "Now."

Jane's arms were crossed defiantly. She shook her head, glaring at both Joyce and Hopper.

He took a step forward and started to speak again, but Joyce stopped him with a hand on his. "Hop, it's okay. She doesn't understand that I was joking."

"That isn't the point," he said, shaking his head. "Would you let one of your boys talk to you that way? Or to me?" Will's eyes grew wider at the thought of that.

"Well, no," Joyce said. "But it's my fault. I should explain to her that I was teasing you."

"It's not your fault. If she didn't understand, she should ask, not yell at you. I am not raising a disrespectful brat."

Jane's expression grew even harder. "NOT a brat," she said, digging in her heels.

"That's how you're acting," he said, crossing his arms to match her stance. "Now, young lady, apologize to Joyce and we can talk." He was surprising even himself with how calm he was remaining. He could feel he was about to lose it though. He refused to back down, reminding himself that she had to learn what is tolerable behavior. And this certainly wasn't. Giving in now was the worst thing he could do.

Jane dropped her chin and gave him an outright, "No."

Will sucked in his breath, not quite believing what he was seeing. Joyce's eyebrows shot up, shocked at Jane's response. Boy, she is going all in, Joyce thought.

Hopper moved so he was standing directly over his daughter and spoke with no room for interpretation.

"Go to your room. Right Now."

No movement from Jane, so he went on, "You have until I get to five or I'm asking Will and Joyce to leave. And take the Christmas tree with them."

She looked up at him, her whole body was tense. The Christmas tree and furniture started to shake slightly. The lights overhead briefly flickered.

"One," Hopper began, not taking his eyes off of hers. He didn't care if the furniture started crashing around him. He was going to follow through with what he'd said.

"Two," he continued.

"Mom," Will whispered to Joyce, "Maybe we should just go?" He really didn't want to be there if Jane brought the whole cabin down.

"I want to stay, honey," she told him quietly. "I think Chief Hopper may need me. Plus, I want to talk to Jane when things, um, calm down."

Will nodded but stood a bit behind his mother, as if that offered him some protection.

"Three," Hopper said, his eyes boring into Jane's.

Jane gave a muffled cry of frustration and pivoted on her heel. She stormed into her room, slamming the door behind her with a wave of her arm. The walls of the cabin briefly shook, and the lights turned off then right back on.

Will let out the breath he had been holding in. "Wow," he said quietly.

"Will, hush," his mom said. She figured Hopper didn't need any commentary on what had just happened. Will closed his mouth.

Hopper went to the refrigerator and got out a beer. Popping the top, he said, "I'm ready for pizza. Anyone else?"

11. Chapter 11- Hopper

Hopper, Joyce, and Will sat at the table eating pizza, being sure to save some for Jane. Will still couldn't believe what he had heard and seen. He would be a goner if he'd ever acted that way to his mom, or any grown up. He reminded himself that Jane was new to having a parent. But seriously, did she want to be grounded for years? He was going over what happened, trying to process it.

"You okay, buddy?" Hopper asked him, wiping his mouth.

"Hmm? Oh yeah, I mean yes, sir, I'm fine."

Joyce reached out and patted his arm. "Jane sure is stubborn, isn't she?" She said with a hint of a smile.

"You could say that," Will mumbled. One time when he was seven or eight, he had wanted to do something and she hadn't let him. He then had yelled "No" to his mom. That was the only and last time he did that. He squirmed on his chair at the memory. His bike had been on lockdown for a long time after that. Not that he would have wanted to sit down and ride it. He shifted his weight and shuddered a bit, remembering.

"You know," Joyce began, as if she were reading Will's mind, "I remember several years ago, you and I had a similar fight."

"Mom!" Will blushed, saying, "And no, we didn't. I mean, ours was a little more one sided." In other words, he thought, I told you no, you lowered the boom. End of fight.

"No furniture was shaking, I agree," she said with a wink.

"I still can't believe she told you to shut up," Hopper said, shaking his head. "And then to be so defiant to me. You know I have taught her better than that. I'm so sorry. I can't imagine what got into her." He felt the need to apologize for Jane's behavior since Jane had not.

"I know you have! I don't blame you. Or her, really. She is still figuring out the world. I think her emotions just get the best of her

and she doesn't know to respond."

Will looked at her incredulously. Was she seriously acting like what Jane had done was no big deal? Who is she and what has she done with my mother, he thought. Apparently his shock showed on his face because she looked at him and asked, "What?"

"What?!" Will was indignant. "Oh, nothing, just if Jonathan or I ever did that, you'd murder us."

"I would not," she answered, confused at Will's reaction.

"Um, I still remember the ONE time I told you no. That nice little memory you shared a few minutes ago? You busted my butt and took away my bike, for like, almost forever."

"Oh, you deserved it," she replied matter of factly, finishing her piece of pizza.

"What about Jane? You're sticking up for her!"

Hopper resisted the urge to tell him to watch how he was talking to his mother. He was in no place to give advice on raising respectful kids at the moment. Plus, he knew Will was a good kid. He also knew Joyce could hold her own. If he got out of hand, she'd rein him back in.

"I am doing no such thing," Joyce responded. "I never said she shouldn't be punished. Will, think about her life until now. She hasn't grown up like you did. Everything is new to her. She doesn't know how to express her feelings."

She sure seemed like she was expressing them a little while ago, he thought, but he didn't say it. Unlike Jane, he knew when to keep his mouth shut.

"I probably should try and talk with her," Hopper said, not looking happy at the prospect. "You two can go on if you want."

"We'll stay a bit if it's okay with you," Joyce said kindly. "How about you and I both talk to her? I'll be the ref. Will, go watch some TV."

Will cleared his plate and glass and went straight to the couch. He wanted no part of their discussion with Jane.

Hopper and Joyce went to Jane's door and knocked, but got no response. That was no surprise to either of them. He turned the doorknob and they walked in her room. Jane was sitting at her desk, her head down on her arms.

Hopper cleared his throat. "Are you ready to talk nicely?" She didn't answer.

He sighed loudly and brought his hand to his forehead and rubbed. His patience was gone.

Joyce looked at him and mouthed, "Stay calm." He nodded, thankful she was there. Joyce stepped in front of him and walked over to Jane. She started rubbing slow circles on the girl's back. Jane let out a deep breath.

"Jane, honey, you need to talk to us," She said softly. How does she do that, thought Hopper. I was about ready to snatch my daughter up and let her know who is in charge.

Jane's head turned and she looked at them both. Her face was streaked with tears, her eyes red. Hopper's resolve started to crumble, just a little, at the sight.

"Come here, kid," he said, and she was in his arms. She held onto him and cried into his chest.

"I'm really sorry!" She muttered.

"Shh, I know," he said soothingly. He sat down on the bed with her, Joyce on her other side. Jane turned and threw her arms around Joyce's neck.

"Sorry, Joyce," she cried.

When she had calmed down a little, her dad caught her eyes and asked, "Why in the world did you act that way?"

Jane's eyes were focused on the bed, and she answered quietly,

"Scrooge."

The two adults looked at each other, sharing the same puzzled expression.

"What about Scrooge?" Hopper asked.

Jane drew in a breath and replied, "Joyce called you Scrooge. Didn't like that. Scrooge is mean. He hates Christmas."

"Honey, I was just teasing your dad. Joking," Joyce tried to explain.

"Not funny," Jane said, scowling at Joyce.

"Watch it," Hopper warned. He may have been having a composed conversation but he was absolutely done with her being rude.

Jane looked back at her lap and mumbled, "Sorry."

"If you didn't like what she said or you didn't understand, you should have asked for one of us to explain. I still cannot believe you told her to shut up. That is not acceptable, at all."

Jane was quietly crying again, and Hopper continued. "Then, I asked you to apologize. That could have been the end of it. But you told me no. Why would you do that?"

"Don't know," she answered honestly. "Was just so mad."

"Not good enough, kid" he said, shaking his head. She wasn't going to get out of this that easily.

"She was kidding, Janie. You know there are lot of things people say that you don't get. That does not excuse your behavior. You can't yell and be disrespectful everytime someone says something you don't understand. I'd better not ever hear you talk like that to Joyce or me or any adult. And you don't ever tell me no. Let me ask you something, who is in charge?"

Jane whispered, "You."

"I always have good reasons for telling you what I do, whether it is

for your safety or your health or because I want you to be a nice person who treats others with respect."

She nodded, big tears silently falling.

He put his hand under her chin and lifted her face so she was looking at him.

"I never, ever want to hear the words 'shut up' come out of your mouth again. Especially not to to an adult. And when I tell you do something, you do it. That is not up for discussion. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," she said, choking back tears.

"And, what do you say to Joyce?" She had already said she was sorry once but he thought a more proper apology was definitely in order.

She wiped her cheeks and turned toward Joyce.

"Sorry," she mumbled, eyes on her lap again.

"Nope, not good enough," Hopper interjected. "Look at her and try again."

She raised her eyes to Joyce's and said more clearly, "I'm really sorry."

Joyce put an arm around her shoulder and said, "Thank you, sweetie. If I ever say anything that you don't like or doesn't make sense to you, please tell me. We can always talk about it, okay? Can you do that for me?"

"Yes, ma'am," Jane replied, looking at Joyce, then to her dad. He nodded his approval. She'd better keep on being respectful.

"Jane, go out there with Will for a minute, please. I need to talk to Joyce," Hopper said.

She immediately obeyed, getting up and walking toward her door. Her dad stopped her by catching her hand, and she turned to look at him.

He lowered his voice and said, "You need to apologize to Will, too. I think it really upset him when you yelled at his mom."

Jane's eyes grew wide and she felt even worse than she already did. She would never want to hurt any of her friends.

"I will, Dad."

"We will talk about consequences later, understand?"

She sighed and nodded. She was really starting to hate that word, consequences.

Jane sat on the couch next to Will, who was watching TV but not really paying attention to it. He didn't say anything.

"Will?" she asked quietly.

He didn't want to get in trouble for being rude and ignoring her, so he replied nonchalantly, "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry for yelling. Dad says Joyce is like family. I shouldn't have said shut up."

"You got that right," Will said, his eyes still on the TV.

"Are you mad at me?"

"I don't even know, honestly. I don't even know why it bothers me."

"Is it complicated?" She asked, "Not easy?"

"Yeah, I guess it is," Will attempted to explain. "I'm thinking, if I did what you did, my mom would ground me for ages. I mean, are you even in trouble? My mom was sticking up for you, you know."

She looked down at the couch and said, "Dad said talk about consequences later. That means trouble."

"Oh," Will said. "Okay, well I'm sorry about that. I hope it's not too bad."

"Thanks, Will. Me too."

He looked at her and smiled. "I mean, I don't want my best friend's girlfriend in trouble for long. Mike will be impossible if he can't see you."

Back in her bedroom, Hopper turned to Joyce.

"Thank you."

"For what?" She asked.

"Everything. Putting up with me, and Jane, and helping me."

"Oh, Hop, I love, um, Jane. I'm happy to help, honestly," she answered sincerely. "And I'm proud of you. You're doing a great job, being her father."

He scoffed, "Yeah, father of the year here. My daughter tells you to shut up then refuses to do what I tell her. Yep, I'm all over this parent thing."

She put her finger to his lips. "Stop it. You ARE doing a great job. No arguments, mister."

He reached up and playfully grabbed the finger she'd placed on his mouth. God, I want to kiss her, he thought. He leaned closer, until their faces were inches apart. He had wrapped his hand around hers, and his thumb was stroking her fingers. Their lips were just about to touch, when they heard...

"Mom!" Will's voice cut through their moment, and Joyce jumped up. She gave Hopper an apologetic look, and walked into the living room.

"Yes, honey?" she asked Will, trying to sound casual.

"Jane wants to know if we can still decorate the tree."

"That's up to her dad," Joyce replied, as Hopper came out of Jane's room.

"Well, we still have to discuss the consequences of your behavior," he answered, looking at Jane. "But, we may as well decorate the tree

since we have all of these lights and ornaments."

"You do the lights first," Will explained to Jane, untangling them and starting to wind the strands around the tree. She was fascinated with the whole process. They strung the lights with minimal help from Joyce and Hopper, then started on the other decorations.

Hopper looked at Joyce and patted his pocket where his cigarettes were, raising an eyebrow at her with a questioning look. She nodded, grabbed her coat, and they stepped out onto the front porch while the kids were hanging ornaments.

He lit her cigarette and then his own. Without even thinking about it, he put his arm around her shoulders. It's the gentlemanly thing to do, he thought. It's cold out here. Yes, that's definitely better, he told himself. For warmth.

"So," she asked, "Have you thought about Jane's punishment? Don't be too hard on her."

He laughed around the cigarette in his mouth. "No wonder Will thought you were defending her. What would you do if it were one of your boys?"

"I don't know. I honestly can't imagine either one of them yelling at me like that. Or telling me no," she admitted.

"Uh-huh, I thought so," Hopper said, feeling vindicated.

"But my boys know better," Joyce added.

"She knows better too! Or she should. She definitely will after tonight. I know so much is new to her, like you said, but that doesn't mean she can get away with that crap. I can't have her going around telling people to shut up or being openly defiant."

She nodded, "Point taken," giving him a sympathetic look. He certainly had his hands full, bless him.

"Now, help me out here. What would you do if Will or Jonathan did what she did?"

"Okay, okay, I guess they'd be grounded. For Jonathan that would mean no driving and no going out. For Will, it would be no bike and no hanging out with his friends. Sometimes I give them both extra chores as a punishment."

"Hardly murder, like Will predicted. He also said you 'busted his butt' that time years ago. Didn't know you had it in you," he teased her, poking her side.

"You'd better believe I did. I didn't hesitate to put either one of them over my knee when they earned it. So, you know, don't try me," she said, winking at him.

Hopper felt his face flush, and he coughed a bit. Why did it just get suddenly warmer, he thought. Is she flirting with me? He shook his head, trying to focus back on the topic at hand. Jane. Yes, Jane.

"Of course, they're both too old for that now," Joyce continued. "And you can't punish Jane that way." He certainly agreed. He wasn't against it, goodness knows he had been on the receiving end during his own growing up years more times than he cared to remember. When it came to Jane, though, he knew he would never lay a hand on her, not after all she had been through before. Physical punishment was definitely out of the question.

"It's hard to ground a kid that never leaves the house anyway," he said with a sigh. "Pretty much all I can do is take away TV. She does hate that though so hopefully it will be effective and she won't do this again."

"Parenting isn't easy." she said, exhaling, her breath visible in the cold air.

"No, it can be, uh complicated," he said, looking into her eyes. She shivered a bit, and he wrapped his arms around her. Just being kind, he told himself, keeping her warm. And she felt so good in his arms. Like a perfect fit. He bent down so their faces were close, and lightly kissed her cheek. Just a friendly kiss, like the night before. One of her hands had snaked up between them and was stroking the side of his face. Jesus, that feels nice, he thought. Soon that same hand was in his beard, then reached around to the back of his neck to pull him a

little closer...

Just then the door flung open and Jane announced excitedly, "We finished the tree!"

Joyce cleared her throat, put out the cigarette that was in her other hand, and turned to walk back inside.

"Let me see!" She said with enthusiasm, though her eyes were on Hopper, still standing on the porch.

Later that night, Hopper was tucking Jane into bed, giving her a kiss on her head, hair still wet from her shower. He had yet to address the topic of her punishment but he knew he couldn't put it off any longer. He sat down on her bed and looked at her sternly, steeling his resolve. This part of parenting is the pits, he thought to himself. He remembered his dad using the old, "This hurts me more than it hurts you" line, which at the time, he thought was total b.s. Now he understood though. He made a mental note to call his own father tomorrow and apologize for everything he ever did as a kid. And that was quite a list.

"Dad, I know!" Her voice sounded thrilled as she interrupted the silence.

He eyed her suspiciously, wondering where this could be going. Just when I was about to lay down the law. Okay, I'll bite, he thought.

"Know what, honey?" He asked.

"I said sorry. Really sorry. Joyce said okay. We talked. So, we don't need any consequences!" She looked very pleased with herself, like she had just made a breakthrough discovery.

He raised one eyebrow and replied, "Nice try, kid. No such luck. It doesn't work that way."

"It can," she answered, looking encouraging. "It can work that way."

"You know, grown ups have consequences too," he explained. "If a grown up is late for their job every day, they may get fired. People who break laws go to jail. Drivers who go too fast get a ticket and

have to pay a fine. That's how the world works."

She nodded sadly, looking defeated that her bright idea had not been successful as she had hoped.

"There are good consequences in life, too," he went on, "People who do really well at their jobs may get a promotion, and get more money. Kids who study get good grades. It works both ways. So, back to tonight. I wouldn't be doing a good job as your dad if I let your behavior go without any consequences."

"You would be! You'd be doing a good job!" She said hopefully.

He shook his head. She's not going to make this any easier. Time to wrap it up so we can both get some sleep.

"No TV," he said firmly.

"How many days?" She asked quietly.

"At least until Christmas. Maybe longer."

"Dad! That's a lot of days!"

He chuckled a little. May as well throw in a math lesson.

"Well, today is December 21st. Christmas is December 25th. So, how many days is that?"

"Four," she answered, looking on the verge of tears.

"That's right. And honestly, it may be longer. Four days with no TV hardly seems equal to the stunt you pulled tonight."

She buried her face in her pillow, embarrassed and ashamed of how she'd acted. Point to dad, he thought.

"And I do have to work tomorrow. I know it will be a long boring day here for you. I have some ideas of how to help you out with that. We'll talk more in the morning. For now, it's past bedtime."

She still was not looking at him, so he said, "Go to sleep, kid. I love

you."

"Love you too," she mumbled, face still nestled in her pillow. "But don't like consequences."

Maybe I am doing something right after all, he thought as he turned off her light and headed to his own bed. And she didn't throw any books at me or say she hates me, he realized, remembering the huge fight they'd had a couple of months ago. Baby steps.

The next morning, when Jane joined him at the breakfast table, she looked around the cabin and noticed something definitely missing.

"Dad?" She asked cautiously.

"Yes?" He said from behind his coffee cup.

"The TV? Gone."

"Not really gone," he responded. "Just temporarily relocated."

"Don't know those words," she said, looking frustrated. "Don't understand."

"Here's the deal, kid. You know you can't watch TV today, right?"

She agreed, "Consequences. No TV till Christmas."

"That's right. Well, I got to thinking. You're going to be here all day by yourself while I am at work. And even though you know you're not supposed to watch TV, I thought the temptation may be too great."

"Tem, temptation?" She was more confused now than when he had first started talking.

"Temptation means wanting to do something even when you know you're not supposed to. Like today, you know you are not allowed to watch TV. But what if you got bored, you may be tempted to turn it on. You know, watch a little when I'm not here."

Her brow was furrowed as she regarded him, concentrating on his words. She crossed her arms, not liking the direction he seemed to be going.

"So, I removed the temptation. The TV is in my truck, and it will go with me to the station, where it will sit in the corner of my office until after Christmas. Great idea, right?"

She frowned, but gave no other response. Time for step two, he told himself.

"Then I thought, poor Jane is going to get really bored today. Not to worry, I've got that covered too."

He reached to his side and handed her a piece of paper he had slipped under the newspaper. She looked at it and he watched her eyes grow bigger. Then her mouth dropped open.

"Oh, you'll need supplies. Your dad has thought of everything."

He got up and retrieved a bucket from under the sink. It was full of various cleaners, sponges, and towels. Jane was busy reading the list. Dust, clean the bathroom, change the sheets, sweep and mop, and it went on.

"Turn the paper over. For the rest," he suggested, draining his cup and reaching for his hat. On the back, she found a list of ten words to look up and define, ten math problems to work, and several reading comprehension questions about A Christmas Carol.

"If you get through all of that and still need more to do, feel free to write a couple of pages on why it's wrong to be disrespectful to adults. I look forward to reading it!"

He put on his coat and grabbed his keys. Jane was staring at him, her mouth still gaping open as he was about to walk out the door.

"Dad!" She said, wanting to get his attention before he left for the day. She held up the list and asked, "Have to? All of this?"

"You sure do. And with your own two hands, not your head. No using powers. Look at the bright side, kid. You won't get bored!"

12. Chapter 12- Jonathan

Thank you to everyone reading and reviewing! I got some great feedback on the last chapter. One reviewer thought Hopper was too hard on Jane and said doesn't he want her to like him. Well, he's her parent, not her friend. As the mom of teenagers, I can tell you, it's not a parent's job for your kid to like you ;)

Friday was a pleasant day for Hopper. He'd gotten some Christmas shopping done on his lunch hour, and his work day had been calm. No crazy calls to deal with, the station was fairly quiet. He felt good about how he'd handled the situation with Jane, though he still second guessed himself somewhat. Did I go overboard with the list, he wondered. But then he told himself that some chores and schoolwork wouldn't hurt her. He was working on a Christmas surprise for her too, which helped to assuage any guilt he may feel for punishing her. He also reminded himself that she had certainly earned that punishment.

He picked up Kentucky Fried Chicken on the way home. Arriving at the cabin, he gave the secret knock, but got no response. He waited a couple of minutes and tried again. Maybe she is in the bathroom and didn't hear me, he thought. He pressed his ear to the door and heard no sound from inside. He knocked a third time, starting to get worried. He fought a wave of panic as he put his mouth to the door and said her name loudly. He felt relief as he finally heard the door unlock, and he entered.

"Janie, where are you?" He said, putting the bucket of chicken down and looking around in concern.

He saw a hand wave from the couch. Walking over, he was met with a half asleep form, sprawled out across the cushions..

"Hmmm, mmm" she mumbled.

The list he had left her was on the coffee table, along with several other pieces of paper showing definitions and word problems. The cabin smelled different, Hopper noticed. It looked different too. She had really cleaned the place. There was no longer dust on the

bookshelves, the floor was clear, and he could see the kitchen sink sparkling from where he stood.

He leaned over her, and felt her forehead, making sure she didn't have a fever. She rarely napped and it was unusual for her to be asleep at 5:30. She didn't feel warm. Her eyes fluttered open at his touch and she sat up abruptly.

"Sorry, Dad!" She said, rubbing her eyes and shaking herself awake.

He sat down next to her and asked, "Sorry for what?"

"Fell asleep. Didn't mean to," she replied around a yawn.

He suddenly felt very guilty. She wore herself out, doing all that cleaning and work I told her to do. She didn't look angry with him though. She stood up and stretched.

"Did your list!" She announced proudly, giving him a hug. "Not a fun day," she added with a pout.

Mission accomplished, he mentally congratulated himself. It wasn't supposed to be fun. Yes she'd gotten tired but she hardly seemed traumatized. Kid has been through real trauma and this wasn't it. This was effective consequences for her behavior. He suspected that deep down, even she understood that. Not that he would expect her to admit it.

"The house looks great," he observed and she smiled.

"Didn't get to the writing. Fell asleep. Okay to do that part tomorrow? Please?"

Whoa, he realized, she's telling on herself. He thought about checking her again for a fever.

"I think that would be just fine," he answered, smiling. Definite point to Dad, he told himself.

"Are you hungry? All you did today probably worked up an appetite."

She nodded vigorously and went to the table, another yawn slipping

out.

"Had Eggos for lunch. And milk," she said, reaching for a piece of chicken.

"I think a treat may be in order to go with this fine meal," Hopper said, going to the refrigerator and retrieving a bottle of Coke.

"There ya, go, kid. And I think we have some ice cream in the freezer for dessert."

"Oh, thanks, Dad!," she said, "Want to see my math?"

"I'd love to. I'll look at it all after dinner," he said fondly. "You did really good today."

Jane went to bed early and while Hopper enjoyed the peace and quiet, he did miss the TV. Normally at night after she was asleep he would relax with a beer and watch a football game or the news. Dang it, he realized, her punishment is hurting me too. He settled for listening to a game on the radio. He was startled to hear the phone ring late. He looked at the clock and it was after 11:00. He must have dozed off on the couch, the loud ringing shocking him.

He answered the phone groggily and was immediately wide awake when he heard crying.

"Hop? Can you come to the police station?"

"Joyce? What is it?"

"It's Jonathan. Please, can you come down here?" Her voice was shaky and distraught sounding.

"You and Jonathan are at the station? What's wrong?"

"He had a wreck. He was drinking and driving," she said, then he heard her break down in tears.

"I'll be right there. Sit tight." He quickly wrote Jane a note in case she woke up and put in on the desk in her room. Grabbing his hat and keys, he was out the door. He was sure to bring his one house key so

he could get back in.

Hurrying into his police station, he saw Jonathan and Joyce right away. Jonathan was sitting in a chair at one of his officer's desks, with his mom standing closeby. He had on handcuffs and his head was resting on the hard wood surface of the officer's workstation.

The officer on duty jumped up and said, "Chief, sir, what are you doing here so late?"

"I called him," Joyce said, sniffing. Her face was red from crying, her features simultaneously tense and exhausted.

"She's a friend of mine," Hopper quickly said, then he added sternly, "Get those cuffs off the boy, now."

"Oh, yes sir, but you know we arrested him for DUI, right?" The officer was stumbling over his words, clearly nervous that his boss had made a rare late night appearance.

"I know that but look at him. He's basically passed out," Hopper said, exasperated. "The cuffs are not necessary. Get them off."

The cop hurried to remove the handcuffs, fumbling with the keys. Once they were off, Hopper walked over to Jonathan, and bent down close to him. The stench of alcohol was strong enough to make Hopper wince. He clapped Jonathan on the back, saying, "Wake up."

Jonathan slowly opened one eye and partially raised his head, then deciding that probably wasn't a good idea, put his head back down on his folded arms on the desk, rubbing his wrists. He was drooling, his hair was wildly going in all directions, and he had the beginning of a bruise on his forehead.

Hopper sighed, shook Jonathan's shoulder, and repeated a little louder, "Look at me."

Jonathan's head lifted, he looked at Hopper, eyes trying to focus and take in his surroundings. Hopper was quite sure the kid had no idea where he was or what had happened.

The chief leaned down and took Jonathan by the shoulders, so they

were face to face. He was studying the boy's bloodshot eyes and bruised head with scrutiny.

"Must have been some night," he pronounced sarcastically, at which point Jonathan's face contorted in pain and he proceeded to vomit all over the desk, floor, and the chief's shoes.

"Damn it," Hopper cursed, jumping back to avoid being in the line of fire again. Joyce moved quickly, retrieving a trash can and putting it under Jonathan.

Hopper took off his shoes, giving Jonathan an aggravated glare, and walked to the sink to rinse them off.

"Let me help you," Joyce followed him. "I still can't believe this," she said, her breath coming in hitches.

"I've got it," Hopper said, running them under the faucet. "So, what happened, Joyce? I need to know everything."

She stood against the sink, running her hands through her hair and shaking her head.

"I really don't know much. There was a party, a bunch of the seniors got together to celebrate exams being over."

"Quite a celebration," Hopper said gruffly, grabbing a bunch of paper towels.

"I've always told him to call me. I've told him a hundred times to never, ever drive after drinking. I wasn't dumb enough to think he would never drink, but I thought he would call me before ever doing something like this," she put her hands over her face, giving in to her tears again.

"I keep thinking I could have lost him tonight, Jim," she said, leaning into his arms. "His car went into a ditch, which I guess I should be thankful. It could have been so much worse. He could have killed someone else or himself."

"Shh," he comforted her. "He's okay. Not great, but not hurt. It's okay.."

He was rubbing her back while she cried, putting his chin on top of her head and holding her close. Her despondent weeping was about to break him.

After a moment, Joyce realized, "He had taken Nancy to the party, but she wasn't in the car, thank goodness. I don't even know if she got home or how."

"Okay, go sit with him a minute while I check to make sure Nancy made it home."

He went into his office, watching as Joyce sat next to Jonathan. He was asleep with his head on his arms, mouth hanging open. That's quite a look, kid, he mused. His mom reached out and was stroking his hair. She lit a cigarette, keeping one hand on her son, as if to reassure herself he was really there and okay. Better be careful, Hopper thought. I have a feeling the boy is not done throwing up.

He called the Wheelers and Karen confirmed that Nancy was asleep in her bed. Hopper had to break the news about the party and Jonathan's accident. He told Karen not to wake Nancy up, she could find out in the morning. He assured her that Jonathan was alright and that Joyce was there with him.

He walked out of his office, and asked Joyce, "Is Will at home asleep?"

She nodded, "I ran out in such a hurry, I didn't even leave a note. I hope he doesn't wake up. What's going to happen now? Does Jonathan have to stay here all night? Am I just supposed to leave him here?" Her face was pale and she looked on the verge of falling apart again.

"No," Hopper said, "He's coming home with me."

"Sir?" Asked the officer. "Don't we have to book him? Let him sleep it off in a cell?"

"WE don't 'have' to do anything that I don't say we do, am I right?" Hopper was in full police chief mode.

"Yes, sir, Chief," the younger cop agreed, nodding and swallowing

hard.

"Glad we understand each other here," Hopper continued. "I say the kid is coming home with me. I'll keep an eye on him tonight and Joyce, I'll call you in the morning. You get home and be there for Will. Jonathan is going to sleep and he's going to feel like absolute crap when he wakes up. You know he will be safe at my place."

Hopper and Joyce helped Jonathan up and together they walked him to Hopper's truck. The teen was being supported by Hopper, his mom helping on the other side. Jonathan started groaning when they eased him into the truck..

"Is he going to be alright?" Joyce asked. "You don't think he needs to go to the hospital, do you?"

"Naw, I don't think so. He'll be okay. He may feel like he's dying but at this point the best thing for him is sleep. I'll get some water in him so he doesn't dehydrate. If I have any doubt, or if he seems worse, I'll take him to the emergency room. Do you trust me?"

She nodded, wiping her face of a few stray tears. "I absolutely do. And thank you for taking him. I couldn't have left if he were in a jail cell."

He gave her a quick kiss on top of her head. "I'll call you when he wakes up."

When Hopper arrived home with Jonathan, he looked at the sleeping teen and wondered how best to get him in the house. I can't carry him and if he only halfway walks like he did leaving the station, he was liable to fall over in the woods. I'm going to have to wake him up, he realized. That would be good though, he could do a quick assessment and make sure Jonathan wasn't dehydrated or sporting a concussion. He knew that rousing him would not be easy. He had snored the entire ride, his mouth wide open.

Hopper reached over, and shook the boy's shoulder, saying loudly, "Jonathan! Wake up. Come on, you have to walk." Jonathan opened his eyes quickly, then closed them again.

"Jonathan!" He practically yelled. "Get up NOW"

Finally, he saw the boy's eyes open and focus. He regarded Hopper with confusion. "What? Where am I," he mumbled, wiping his hand over his face. Hopper knew from experience that his mouth probably felt as dry as a cotton ball.

"It's me, Chief Hopper, and you're at my house. Well, not yet. At the moment you are in my truck in the middle of the woods. You've got to wake up enough to walk. Can you do that?"

"Sure," Jonathan replied, as if Hopper had asked him to perform a ridiculously easy task. With that, he opened the door and obviously misjudged his ability to stand, let alone, walk. He promptly rolled out of the truck, threw up, then tumbled onto the ground with audible moan.

"Oh good Lord," Hopper sighed, walking over to the passenger side and closing the door. Jonathan looked as if he had no clue how to get up or where he was. Thank God he didn't puke in my truck, Hopper thought, looking at the prone lump in the middle of the leaves.

"Let's go," Hopper said, helping to heave Jonathan to his feet. The boy was swaying.

"You've got to walk. I'm going to help but if you can't make it to the house, we are going back to the police station and you are sleeping in a cell. Got me?"

Jonathan nodded, his head moving heavily. "Want to sleep."

"I'm sure you do," Hopper quipped, putting one of Jonathan's arms around his own shoulder and steadying him as they headed to the cabin.

Upon entering, the chief deposited Jonathan on the couch and took off his shoes.

'Okay, son, you're going to sleep here but you've got to do a couple of things first. The first is go to the bathroom. I don't really want you pissing yourself on my sofa, no offense."

Jonathan focused on the light in the bathroom to help him reach the destination, wobbling the whole way. He returned to the living room and spread out on the couch, face halfway hanging off a cushion.

"Not yet, Sleeping Beauty," Hopper stopped him. "Next step is, drink this. If you get dehydrated, we'll be in the emergency room getting you IV fluids. I'm sure it's lots of fun down there on a Friday night," he added sharply. He handed Jonathan a glass of water and watched until he'd ingested it all. He refilled the glass and set it on the coffee, with instructions to keep sipping on it.

"Last thing. Change into these. Your clothes reek of vomit and booze," Hopper handed him a pair of sweatpants and a tee shirt.

Jonathan scoffed, "I'm not even that drunk," taking the clothes and removing his own shirt.

"Really?" Hopper questioned, holding the dirty tee shirt at arm's length. "We'll talk about that when you wake up. No sense in doing it now considering you wouldn't remember it in the morning anyway."

Jonathan collapsed onto the pillows, grumbling that he hadn't drank that much. The last thing Hopper did before the kid was snoring was place a trash can next to the couch, put an ice pack on Jonathan's head, and cover the sleeping figure with a quilt.

13. Chapter 13- Jonathan

As always, thank you for reading and reviewing! I hope this chapter sheds some light on Jonathan's actions in the previous one.

Jonathan rolled to his back and threw one arm across his face, the barrage on his senses jolting him into semi wakefulness. Overhead lights, loud Christmas music, and the smell of eggs and bacon had him moaning.

"Dad! Jonathan is awake! You told me to yell when he was!"

Jonathan grunted and put his hands over his ears.

"Thank you, Janie!" Hopper shouted back.

Jonathan was just registering where he was. Why is everyone so loud? And what is that music? The Carpenters' Christmas? Holy crap, he'd give anything to throw the record player out the window. His head felt too heavy to lift and his stomach was churning.

Suddenly there was an inquisitive face with messy curls leaning over him.

"Are you sick?" She asked.

"No," he whispered.

"Smell sick," Jane answered.

"Jane, come finish your breakfast," her dad called. "Eggs aren't good cold. Jonathan needs to take a shower, whether he knows it or not."

"Why is Jonathan here?" She asked, resuming her meal. "Is he having a sleepover? Not fair. Will should have come."

"It's not a sleepover. Let's just say Jonathan is experiencing some consequences. The hard way."

"Consequences are no fun," Jane observed.

"By the way," Hopper interjected, "You'll never have a sleepover with a boy. I'll explain why later. I'm not up for that discussion at the moment."

Jane accepted that with a shrug, not really knowing what her dad was talking about.

Hopper went to the couch, holding a glass of water and two Tylenol. "Here ya go. And you're welcome. Though I'm not sure it will help much. I'm betting you have a bitch of a headache."

Jonathan nodded, looked at him warily, cleared his throat, and swallowed the pills with a wince. His hand went to a tender spot on his forehead and gingerly pushed. "Ow," he mumbled.

"Yes, that's where your head hit the steering wheel. Good thing you weren't going very fast. And I put ice on it last night so the bump isn't nearly as bad as it could have been. It's going to be a really colorful bruise though."

"I really don't feel good. Do we have to talk about last night?" He asked quietly, his hand rubbing his eyes.

"Yes, but shower first. Your clothes are clean and I put them on the bathroom counter. I don't have an extra toothbrush but there's some mouthwash in there you can use. That's better than nothing."

Jonathan sighed and lay back down, covering his face with a pillow.

"Nope, no going back to sleep. I know you feel like crap but you need to get up and get moving." Hopper removed the pillow from the boy's face and gave him a pointed look.

"Oh, we need to call your mom first," he remembered, dialing the phone and turning down the volume on the record player, much to Jonathan's relief. "I told her I would. She's probably been worried sick all night."

"Hey Joyce, your boy is awake and still in one piece. Not feeling too good as you can imagine," there was a pause and he said, "Sure."

He held out the phone toward Jonathan and said, "She wants to talk

to you."

He slowly got off the couch, sighing and holding his stomach.

"Hi, Mom," he spoke quietly into the phone, his eyes focused on the floor.

"Yeah, I'm okay..."

He mumbled a few more one word answers to her questions, then hung up the phone.

"She said to say thank you for bringing me here. And that you saved me from spending the night in jail."

"That I did," Hopper replied matter of factly. "Now take that shower. You stink. Afterwards, you can go clean out my truck since you threw up all over it last night."

The little color in Jonathan's face drained and his eyes grew wide. "I did?"

Hopper chuckled and said, "Just kidding. You were thoughtful enough to puke on the ground. Oh, and once at the station. I bet my late shift cops had a great time cleaning that. Not to mention my shoes will never be the same."

I threw up at the police station, Jonathan wondered. The memories were slowly coming back, though they were fuzzy. There were faint recollections of the party, and of Nancy getting mad and leaving. Oh, God, Nancy. How did she even get home? I started to drive home and the next thing I remember, I was waking up in the back of a police car.

He dragged himself to the bathroom. On the way, he asked, "Can you take me home after I shower?"

"You and I have some things to get done here first. I'll take you home later." Hopper said. His tone let Jonathan know it would not be wise to ask anymore questions.

What could the chief and I have to do here, Jonathan thought to

himself as he felt the hot water wash over him in the shower. Probably a lecture on the night before. Well, he can save his breath. It was stupid, I get it. I don't need to hear it from him. I'm not some little kid like Will and his friends. I've fought worse than a dumb night of partying and a hangover and come out on the other side.

The shower and clean clothes did feel good, though his head was absolutely pounding and his stomach was tossing and turning. He wanted nothing more than to lay down in a dark and quiet room until he felt better. Something told him that was not what Chief Hopper had in mind for the rest of his day, however.

"Jonathan!" The chief's voice cut through his head like an ax. Holy hell, does he have to scream like that. I think he's doing it because he knows it's killing me.

He rounded the corner and saw Hopper sitting at the kitchen table.

"Want some breakfast?" He asked, gesturing with an egg-laden fork. Jonathan's lips were clamped shut as he shook his head quickly, not wanting to risk opening his mouth at all lest he get sick. His arms were wrapped tightly around his midsection.

"Didn't think so," Hopper snickered. "Drink water, and lots of it. Maybe you can try some toast or something in a little while."

Jonathan sat down opposite him and pressed his hand to his forehead.

"Chief, I really appreciate you saving me from going to jail. Can we please get the lecture over with so I can go home? I just want to be in my own bed."

"I'm sure you do. But no, that's not happening. At least not yet. You are going to help me out here for awhile here first. And I'm not really the lecturing type"

"Help you?" I'm barely keeping my head up, Jonathan thought. What in the hell does he want my help with?

The chief got up from the table and reached for his coat and hat. "Hold on," he told Jonathan and disappeared into his room. He

returned with another heavy coat, gloves, and a hat. "Put these on. It's cold outside."

Jonathan looked confused and asked, "Are we going somewhere?"

"Just outside. We are going to repair the railing on my porch. I've been waiting for the perfect time to do it and now here you are, a strapping young man willing and able to help me. I'd say it's meant to be."

Hopper called to Jane, who was sitting at the desk in her room finishing the schoolwork he'd given her the day before. He told her that he and Jonathan would be right outside. She responded, "Okay, Dad! Love you!"

"Alright, let's go," he said to Jonathan, opening the front door to a blast of cold air.

"This railing wobbles every time I come here to enjoy my coffee or a smoke. I keep thinking that one day it's going to fall over when I lean on it, taking me with it."

Jonathan's goal was to get this finished as quickly as possible so maybe the chief would take him home. Hopper had started to remove some of the old nails with a hammer.

"Hold these," he said, depositing a supply of nails in Jonathan's gloved hand. The teen sighed in annoyance.

"Am I boring you?" Hopper asked with a raised eyebrow, though his eyes remained focused on the nails he was extracting.

Jonathan shook his head but was feeling bold. "Is this my punishment? I know what I did last night was dumb. I don't need some cheesy life lesson."

"Good to know," Hopper replied, not missing a beat. "I think you've got plenty of other punishment coming your way so think of this more as paying me back for getting your ass out of jail. Since you brought up the topic though, we can talk about punishment. First of all, your license is suspended so you'll be taking the bus to school, or I guess your mom could drive you. "

Jonathan remained quiet. He hadn't thought of his driver's license. Great, he thought, I'll be a senior riding the bus.

"Not that you'd have anything to drive even if you did have a license," the chief continued, "Considering that the front bumper of your car was totally wrecked. So that's got to be fixed. And that costs money."

Jonathan closed his eyes and shook his head in frustration. Damn it, he thought, it'll take me forever to save up that much. He knew his mom didn't have any extra money.

Hopper had taken some of the nails out of his hand and was now hammering them into the railing. Every strike of the hammer felt like it was going straight through Jonathan's temple. That part was definitely punishment, even if the chief denied it.

"Ugh," he groaned, then stopped himself. Hopper laughed a little.

"Head still not feeling good, huh?" He asked sarcastically, still hammering.

"I'm doing all the talking here. Your turn. Want to let me in on what you were thinking last night?" Hopper asked, nonchalantly, not making eye contact. His focus remained on the piece of wood he was nailing.

Jonathan shrugged, but gave no other response.

"I'll be honest, son, I'm surprised. You are such a mature, responsible kid. I really thought you had better decision making skills."

Silence still from Jonathan.

"You've practically been the man of the house, taking care of your mom and Will, since your dad split. And I've personally seen you take on stuff most grown men would run from. But you didn't."

"Maybe that's why," Jonathan said in a voice barely louder than a whisper.

"What was that?" Hopper asked, putting down the hammer.

"Doesn't matter," Jonathan mumbled. "I was an idiot. I get it."

"Let's sit a minute," Hopper suggested, taking a spot on a step and motioning for him to do the same.

"And it does matter. To me, your mom, Will, everyone who counts on you."

"I'm 17, Chief. 17. Maybe for one night, I didn't want people counting on me. Maybe I didn't want to be the man of the house after my loser dad left us. Maybe I didn't want to be mature and responsible and fight monsters and God knows what else." He took a deep breath to keep his composure, his breath hitching and voice cracking.

Poor kid, Hopper thought. I'd probably go on a bender too. But he had to make Jonathan see that getting drunk and driving was not a good way to deal with all he has been through.

"It's one thing to let loose at a party. I'm not that old, kid. I was a teenager and I did a lot of stupid stuff. Having a beer or two is one thing. You were hammered last night. And you tried to drive. That goes beyond having fun at a party."

"I know. I really thought I was okay to drive! I thought I could handle it."

"Yeah, that's what that much alcohol does to you. I'm not one to preach about that," Hopper said, lighting a cigarette.

"Nancy tried to take my keys. I yelled at her and she left. She'll probably never speak to me again," Jonathan groaned, putting his hand in his hands.

"She'll probably speak to you. I've seen how she looks at you. She was scared last night, I'm sure."

Jonathan nodded and added softly, "Was my mom scared last night?"

"You have no idea, kid. She was a wreck, totally panicking. You could have killed yourself or someone else."

That hurt, Jonathan thought, nodding.

"Can you promise me, and her, that you'll never drive after drinking? You can always call one of us."

"Yes, sir," he said quietly. "I'm probably going to be grounded till graduation anyway."

"Why don't you go inside and rest your head a little while then I'll take you home. I'll finish up out here."

Jonathan was relieved at the opportunity and hurried inside before the chief changed his mind. He sat on the couch and relaxed for the first time since before his crazy night. Jane was sitting in her room; Jonathan could see her from where he sat.

"Hey, Jane," he called.

"Yes?" She answered.

"Where's the TV?" He asked, looking around.

"Consequences," came her one word reply.

14. Chapter 14- Jane

This chapter is a bit shorter, but it ends at what I felt was a natural stopping point. Christmas fluffiness coming in this and the next chapter! I hope you enjoy. Please review and thank you for reading!

Hopper was awoken from a deep sleep by a loud crash and yelling. He sat straight up and instinctively reached for his weapon and jumped out of bed. The noise was coming from Jane's room. Running toward the commotion, he heard her screaming, "No!" repeatedly. Her cries were accompanied by the sound of furniture and windows rattling. When he got to her room, he saw that the crash he'd heard had been the lamp from her desk, which was now shattered in pieces on the floor. After a quick assessment of the room, he saw that there was no one there and she was in the throes of a nightmare. Her body was thrashing in the bed, her fists were pounding, and she was crying. The desk and bedside table were shaking, the window clattering. He reached for her, speaking softly but loud enough to hopefully wake her up.

"Jane, honey, it's Dad," he repeated. "Wake up, Janie, wake up." He wrapped his arms around her body in an attempt to calm her flailing.

After a few seconds, which felt to him like much longer, her eyes flew open and wildly searched around her. She saw Hopper holding her and began to relax, crying into his arms.

"Daddy," she sobbed, "So scary. Pa-papa was there. And bad men!"

Hearing her call him Daddy was almost more than his heart could take. He hugged her tightly and rocked back and forth, saying soothingly, "Sssh, it was a bad dream. None of that is here. You're safe, here with me."

Her sobs eventually calmed down though she kept tight grip on his arms, still wrapped around her.

"Think you can go back to sleep?" He asked cautiously.

She shook her head quickly, saying, "No! Don't leave!"

"Okay, honey, I'll stay. I'll stay," he said, shifting so his back was against her headboard and she was leaning against him.

Her eyes were closing, even as she was mumbling, "Can't sleep. Don't leave me." They stayed that way for some time, until he could tell by how heavy she felt against him and how steady her breathing sounded that she was indeed fast asleep. He carefully laid her down on the bed and slipped out from behind her. Need to get the broken lamp pieces off the floor before she gets up, he thought. He didn't want her to get out of bed and step in the shards.

He swept the mess as quietly as he could, only hearing her roll over once and sigh heavily. After he was finished, he went back to his own room to try and get some more sleep.

A few hours later, he was once again roused from sleep by his daughter. This time, though, it was in a much more pleasant way.

She bounced on his bed, happily announcing, "Christmas Eve, Dad!"

He reluctantly opened his eyes, saying half asleep, "Sure is..."

"Time to get up! It's a special day!" She continued to jump up and down next to his head.

"Oh, kid, can I have a few more minutes? Go make you some Eggos. Check on Snowball."

That's all she needed to hear to run out of his room, saying, "Okay!"

He knew the surprise he had planned for later would take a lot out of him and he wanted as much sleep as possible. He rolled over, covering his face with the pillow. Yes, definitely need sleep before the craziness that was to come.

Hopper successfully dozed a while longer before deciding to get up for good. He went straight for the coffee pot, and checked on Jane.

"How are you?" He asked, wanting to be sure she wasn't still upset by her nightmare.

"Okay," she said, not adding any details.

"I'm sorry..." came Jane's quiet apology from the kitchen table, where she was sitting and coloring.

"For what?" He asked, turning on the coffee.

"Woke you up. Bad dream."

"That is absolutely not your fault," he said, crossing over to where she sat and hugging her. "You never have to apologize for having a bad dream, understand?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, then added proudly, "Manners, right?"

He chuckled a bit. "Very polite manners, kid."

"So, I think today would be just right for some more housework and school work, don't you agree?" He asked her, keeping his face stern.

She looked at him, slowly nodding, trying not to show her disappointment.

"I'm kidding," he let her off the hook, smiling and laughing a little. "Do you think I would make you do that on Christmas Eve? Besides, the place is cleaner than it's ever been! And school work can take a break for a couple of days."

"Dad," she said in mock seriousness, though she was smiling too, "Not nice to tease me." She crossed her arms and stuck out her bottom lip.

"I'm sorry, Janie," he said, putting a kiss on top of her messy curls.

"Since it is Christmas Eve, maybe we could do something together, how does that sound?"

"That sounds very good!"

"How about we make some hot chocolate and work on a puzzle together? I'll put on some Christmas music and I'll read you the cartoons from the paper. I know you love that."

"That's a great day, Dad!" She responded, her eyes lit up with joy. Just wait, he thought. If that gets you so excited, you will be jumping out of your skin in a few hours.

They passed the afternoon amiably, enjoying each other's company. Jane was surprised when he told her, "Time to go take a shower and brush your teeth. Put on something nice."

"Why?" She asked, looking up from the book she was reading to Snowball. It was a children's Christmas book that had been Sara's.

"Christmas Eve is not for asking why. It just may be a time for surprises. And no more questions," he answered mysteriously.

"One more question? Can I finish the book? Snowball wants me to."

"That was two questions, and yes. I'm sure Snowball needs to know what Santa brings the girl in the story."

"Santa isn't real," she stated matter of factly, directing the information to the kitten on her lap. "Holly believes in Santa because she's little."

Hopper felt a twinge of regret. After Mike's sister had brought up Santa, he had briefly considered telling Jane he did exist, to give her one Christmas with that magical experience. But in the end, he'd decided that it would be too difficult and confusing to explain to her the truth when the time came. One more aspect of childhood that would be lost to her, thanks to her upbringing, and he hated it. He told himself she was going to have a special Christmas, even without Santa.

He listened to her finish the book, his heart pained at the memory of reading it to Sara. He shook his head, clearing the sad thoughts, determined to focus on the present. He was proud to hear Jane only stumbling over a few words, then announced, "Okay, scoot. No more stalling."

She was not about to question anymore, so she told Snowball seriously, "Dad says I have to get up."

Hopper made a quick phone call while she was doing what he'd asked, to make sure his surprise was set to go. Everything seemed to

be poised to arrive as he had planned.

When Jane emerged from getting ready, she looked around the cabin, halfway expecting some surprise to have appeared. But she knew that Christmas presents came during the night, when you were asleep. Hopper enjoyed seeing her wonder where the surprise he'd promised could be. She sat down on the couch, cross legged with Snowball once again in her lap and reached for another book. Before she could begin, she heard a knock at the door. Jane jumped up and looked to her dad, waiting to see if he would tell her to go hide.

She was confused because instead of looking worried, he was grinning as went to the door. He took a deep breath, mentally preparing for the onslaught that was on the other side, and opened it.

"Merry Christmas!" Came a chorus of voices, and suddenly there was a barrage of people coming into the cabin, lead by Mike Wheeler.

Jane squealed with delight and threw her arms around Mike, too stunned and happy to even speak. He was followed by Dustin, Lucas, Will, and finally, Joyce. Jane was still in shock as she hugged everyone. Joyce was loaded down with bags and boxes; Hopper hurried to take some of it to the kitchen.

"Look at her face," Hopper said to Joyce, and his voice hitched a little. He cleared his throat and sniffed.

"Why, Chief," Joyce said sweetly, "I do believe there's something in your eye."

"Just a bit dusty in here," he replied, turning around to unload the food.

"Uh-huh, definitely," Joyce agreed, although she had already noticed the place was spotlessly clean.

Hopper was startled to feel a pair of arms wrap around his waist and he heard Jane say, "Thank you, Dad! Thank you. Best Christmas ever!"

And after that, he couldn't even pretend it was dusty.

15. Chapter 15- Christmas Eve

Another chapter! I hope you enjoy it. Jopper heavy at the end :)

"Be careful over there. Those needles are making me nervous," Hopper warned, glancing over his shoulder from the sink, where he and Joyce were doing the dishes.

The kids were sitting in front of the tree, stringing popcorn and cranberries.

"Being careful, Dad," Jane called back.

"Stop worrying, they're fine," Joyce admonished him.

"Forgive me for not wanting them to bleed all over my floor," he replied, bumping her hip with his. "Whose idea was it to give them sharp needles?" He said, eyeing Joyce.

"You said you wanted her to have a traditional Christmas. That's traditional."

"Hmm, well as long as they're not poking anyone's eye out," he said, still keeping a watch on the kids. "So, how is Jonathan?"

"When we left to come over here, he was on the phone with Nancy, trying to patch things up," Joyce said, shaking her head as she dried the dish in her hand.

"I take it he's under house arrest, imposed by you?" He asked, knowing the answer.

"Damn right. He'll be lucky if I let him out of the house at all in the foreseeable future. And if I didn't already thank you enough, I'll say it again. Thank you for coming that night and bringing him here."

"You know I didn't mind. Goodness knows you've helped me with Jane that much and more. And thanks for doing all of this tonight, needles notwithstanding," he said, winking at her.

On the floor, the five kids were happily chatting and threading the

popcorn and berries, Snowball walking between them.

"I like your cat," Dustin said, stroking her. "My mom is crazy about cats."

"Your mom is really, really crazy about cats," Lucas corrected him.

"My dad got Snowball for me for Christmas. Early present," Jane explained, then lowering her voice as if she were sharing a secret, she said, "You know Santa isn't real, right?"

Dustin cracked up, laughing but Lucas smacked his arm, quieting him down.

"Yeah, we know," Mike replied kindly. "Holly still believes though. She went and sat on Santa's lap and asked for that Barbie thing she wants."

"Erica will probably get a bunch of annoying toys that she'll scream if I even touch one," Lucas added, rolling his eyes.

Hopper and Joyce were sitting on the couch now, watching the interaction and smiling. Somehow, Hopper's arm had found its way around Joyce's shoulder.

"Hey Jane," said Will, "Where's the TV? I thought maybe we could watch a Christmas movie."

Jane dropped her eyes, "No TV till after Christmas."

Joyce looked at Hopper approvingly, and whispered, "Good going, Dad. I know that probably wasn't easy for you."

"You have no idea," he said, "I haven't been able to watch football at night! The things we do for our kids..."

Joyce laughed and said sarcastically, "Poor Hop, that's quite a sacrifice for you."

"Jeez, what did you do to get the TV taken away?" Dustin asked in disbelief.

"Shut up, dude," Mike said, "It's none of your business."

Jane lunged forward and put her hand over Mike's mouth. "Mike," she said quietly and sternly, "Do NOT say shut up. Really bad. Consequences."

He nodded, her hand still on his mouth. She continued, "Never say it to a grown up. You lose TV for a lot of days."

He nodded in agreement and she slowly removed her hand.

"Wait," Lucas said, putting together what she said, "Did you tell your dad to shut up?"

"No," she clarified in a practical tone, "Will's mom."

Will was the only one who didn't look completely shocked, Lucas and Dustin burst out laughing. Mike looked concerned.

"Oh my God," said Lucas, "I'd be a dead man."

"Lots of consequences. And don't tell your dad no," Jane added seriously, feeling like the boys definitely could benefit from her experience. "If your dad tells you to say sorry, say it. Don't make him count."

Lucas and Dustin were laughing so hard, they were holding their sides, and Mike threw them a frustrated look. He didn't like feeling like they were laughing at her, though even he had to admit he was surprised at what she was revealing. Painfully honest to a fault. Like the chief had warned him, she tells everything. He fought a chuckle as he pictured her telling Will's mom to shut up and telling the chief no. He couldn't imagine it.

"Jane, tell me you didn't," Mike said, shaking his head in amazement.

"Just told you, I did," she said carefully, as if Mike wasn't understanding.

"Believe me, she did. I was here," Will contributed, shuddering a little.

"Okay, don't do that again, alright?" Mike asked, wanting to be sure.

"Won't do it again," she replied, shaking her head emphatically, "Don't like consequences."

Lucas and Dustin were wiping their faces and catching their breaths after their uncontrollable hysterics. Jane looked confused.

"Sorry," Dustin said. "We weren't laughing at you, El, uh, Jane. It was just the mental image of you telling Chief Hopper no, and him counting..." and he was overtaken by laughter again.

"Something funny, Henderson?" Hopper's voice came from the couch.

Dustin straightened up and responded with a salute, "No, sir! Nothing at all!"

He turned back to the group and let out an audible breath. "Jane, you've got guts. I mean I knew you did because I've seen you do some really brave shit. But talking back to him," he continued quietly, gesturing with his thumb to Hopper, "That's next level."

"I heard that," the chief interjected, "And watch your language. No cussing around Jane. That's a rule."

How did he hear me, Dustin thought. He's scary as hell and he has bionic hearing.

"You whisper like you're in a factory, Henderson," Hopper called.

Dustin's eyes grew wide as he looked at his friends. Can the guy read minds too, he wondered.

"The TV is at my dad's office. Got rid of the temptation," Jane explained.

"We don't need TV," Mike said, wanting to change the topic for Jane's sake, offering her his hand to help her up and put the stringed popcorn on the tree.

"Pretty," Jane said, laying the colorful garland on the tree's branches.

"Really pretty," Mike added, his eyes on Jane, not the tree. He was

still holding her hand, a fact her father noticed and loudly cleared his throat. Mike immediately dropped it.

"Dad, can I give Mike his Christmas present?" She asked hopefully. "It's in my room."

Joyce nodded and Hopper reluctantly followed suit. "Keep the door open."

"Yes, sir," Mike called as Jane lead him to her room.

"Dad didn't let me go shopping. Didn't know what to get you anyway," she said, looking disappointed.

"You don't have to get me anything! Really. Just getting to see you is my present."

She beamed and said, "Made you something though." She opened her desk drawer and pulled out a piece of paper and something else tiny, wrapped in tissue paper.

The paper was a picture she had drawn and colored. It clearly depicted the two of them at The Snow Ball, right down to the decorations in the gym and her blue dress.

"To remember it by," she said softly.

"This is great, Jane!" He said enthusiastically. "I am going to frame it and put it on my wall."

"Open the other one," she said eagerly.

He unwrapped the tissue and found a braided friendship bracelet. "Made it myself. Used black string. Because you're a boy. Thought you wouldn't like pink."

He laughed and said, "I love it. Will you tie it on me?" He held out his wrist.

She hesitated a minute. "Won't be able to take it off."

"I know! I don't want to take it off. Ever," he reassured her. She

smiled and tied it.

"I'm glad you're my boyfriend," she said, hugging him. This is the best Christmas Eve ever, he thought, holding her close, her head on his shoulder.

"Jane! That's enough time with you two in there. Come back out here with your other guests," Hopper's voice came from the other room. Mike rolled his eyes and Jane giggled in response. She saw that her dad's back was turned, so she quickly leaned forward and kissed Mike's cheek. His face blushed crimson, and they walked into the living room.

"Let's give Jane her present," Will suggested. "Can we, Mom?"

"Fine with me if it's okay with her father. It's in the trunk of my car. Come and help me, Chief," Joyce said, hoisting him up off the couch. I guess it's not really up to me, Hopper thought. Looks like we are going to get it, wondering what the gift was.

A few moments later, the door flung open and all of the kids yelled, "Merry Christmas!" as Joyce and Hopper rolled a brand new shiny pink bike into the cabin.

Jane's jaw fell open and she was speechless. She ran over to the bike and reached out carefully to touch it, as if she were afraid it could disappear.

Hopper was still in shock too. He pulled Joyce to the side and asked quietly, "Where did the kids get this kind of money?"

"Christmas is not a time to be asking questions," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

"Joyce, if you did this, I can't let you. I have to pay you back," he replied seriously.

She put her hands up, saying, "It wasn't me, I swear. The kids pooled their money and the parents each contributed a little too. But it was mostly the kids, honestly. And the bike was on sale. The whole thing was Mike's idea."

"Wheeler," the chief said, "Come here a minute."

Mike turned from where he stood by the bike, watching Jane gaze at her gift. She had finally found her voice and was thanking them all profusely.

Mike walked slowly to the chief, visibly scared and dragging his feet. Oh God, he thought, is he pissed? Great. I try to do something nice and it backfires on me. He's probably going to make us return it.

"This was your idea?" Chief Hopper asked sternly.

Mike briefly considered lying, scared to death Jane's dad was mad at him, and that was the last thing he wanted. He opted to be honest, so he gulped and replied, "Yes, sir." He figured being polite about it could only help his case.

Hopper rubbed his stubbly chin and asked, "You know she doesn't know how to ride it?"

"Yes, sir, I know but I, I mean we, can teach her," Mike said. "And I thought she would have all spring and summer to practice. By the fall, she can ride it to school, like we do."

Hopper's eyebrows shot up at that. Kid is assuming a lot there, he realized.

Mike stammered, "If you say it's okay, of course."

"Seems like a kind of expensive present," Hopper continued, still fixing Mike with a steely glare.

"We all put our money together. And I did some extra chores at home to earn some more money from my parents. The other guys did too."

"I see," Hopper put out his hand for Mike to shake, letting the kid off the hook and saying, "Good gift."

Mike let out the breath he didn't realize he was holding in and returned the handshake, grinning. Point to Mike, he thought.

"Dad!" Came Jane's voice as she ran over to him. "Isn't it pretty?"

"You bet, kid," he agreed. His eyes caught Joyce's and he motioned to the front porch. She nodded and grabbed her coat.

Jane was showing Snowball the new bike and was asking the boys a million questions about it. Hopper and Joyce stepped outside, each lighting a cigarette.

"You keep a good secret," he said to her, smiling.

"I'm an excellent secret keeper. That's one reason I asked you what you were getting her for Christmas. I wanted to make sure you weren't buying her one."

"I'm embarrassed to say but I never even thought of a bike," he admitted. "I guess it never occurred to me with us living out here in the middle of the woods. That and the fact that she doesn't know how to ride it."

"Plenty of teachers in there," Joyce replied.

"I don't doubt it. Wheeler just told me she can ride it to school in the fall. IF I allow it. Which I probably won't."

She laughed. "You're not going to cut him an inch of slack, are you?"

"Would I be doing my fatherly duty if I did?" He grinned.

She playfully slapped his chest and he caught her hand. It felt cold but soft in his. He didn't let go. She looked up at him and he dropped their joined hands to his side so he could pull her closer. Once again, for warmth, he told himself. She shivered briefly and put her body against his. She felt warm and safe. Oh, who am I fooling, he thought. There is obviously something between us. Are we both just too chicken to admit it? Or too busy being parents and everything else? Yes, that's the reason neither of us will make the first move. Too busy, definitely. Too much to focus on. No time for distractions.

"Joyce, I think we should, uh..." Suddenly, he couldn't remember what he was going to say because she had one hand in his and the other wrapped around his back, closing the small gap between them. Her eyes found his, and he felt lost in them, forgetting all else but looking at her. Their faces moved closer, he had his free hand

stroking her hair, his thumb brushing her cheek. Then their lips were touching and he was kissing her, gently at first, tentatively, then more passionately. Her arms tangled around his neck, her hands in his hair. He was caressing her sides and back, their lips never parting until she broke the kiss to catch her breath. He trailed kisses along her jaw and down her neck.

"Hop, Jim, this really isn't the place," she said unconvincingly, her movements betraying her words. Even as she spoke, her hands were roaming while he kissed her.

"You got a better place in mind?" He mumbled into her neck, grazing his lips along her collarbone. She tossed her head back, his mouth felt so good on her skin.

Then his mouth was back on hers and their hands were everywhere at once and there was no one else anywhere but the two of them until...

"Dad!" Jane's voice rang out through the cold air. Joyce and Hopper broke apart abruptly, turning to see five young teens standing in the doorway, staring in shock.

16. Chapter 16- Hopper

Here's another chapter! We have snow days to thank for all of these updates. I'm a teacher in the South, so even the threat of snow means no school :) Please read and review; the feedback is much appreciated!

"Dad!" Jane's voice rang out through the cold air. Joyce and Hopper broke apart abruptly, turning to see five young teens standing in the doorway, staring in shock.

Dustin's hand immediately went to cover his eyes as he turned and ran back into the cabin. The others were frozen in surprise, unable to move. Will's mouth dropped wide open, Lucas and Mike looked like deer caught in headlights.

Jane was the only one to speak. "Dad. You and Joyce have your grubby hands all over each other! You told me not to do that!"

Mike, ever protective of Jane, attempted to save them all from further embarrassment, saying, "Sssh, let's go back inside," pulling Jane's hand back. She went with him, Lucas quickly following.

Only Will remained rooted where he stood, seemingly stuck. Joyce took a step toward him, her voice soft, "Will, honey..." That was enough to shock him back to consciousness. He started to walk backwards, moving as if an invisible string were pulling him.

"Mom, please, just don't say anything, okay? Please," he begged, adding the last please so it did not sound like he was telling her what to do. More like pleading for her to please not talk. He knew whatever she could say would only make the whole thing even more mortifying, if that were possible.

Hopper cleared his throat and spoke then, saying, "Joyce, it's probably time to get the boys home. It is Christmas Eve, after all. I'm sure their parents want them to have some family time and get in bed at a decent hour."

"Oh, yes, of course," she agreed.

They walked in the house, Joyce running her hands through her hair, hoping she didn't look as flustered as she felt.

"Kids, get ready to go and say your goodbyes," Hopper mumbled, not looking at any of them.

While the boys were awkwardly gathering their coats and saying bye to Jane, Joyce fixed her eyes on Hopper and whispered, "You and Jane are still coming for lunch tomorrow, right? Like we'd planned?"

He exhaled loudly, and replied, "Do you think that's a good idea? I don't want it to be uncomfortable for you. Or me," he added with a snicker.

"It will be alright," she said, patting his arm. "We aren't in high school, you know. We didn't just get caught under the bleachers."

"Sure felt like it," he admitted, his worried features giving into a smile. "I'll call you in the morning. I'm not coming over if Will is upset."

"He'll be fine. He's a tough kid," she said. Hopper wasn't so sure. Fighting monsters may be nothing compared to being 13 years old and catching your mother making out.

"Mom, um, we're ready to go," Will said cautiously.

"Thank you again for my bike!" Jane called as the party made their way to the door, the boys avoiding eye contact with either adult.

Jane watched from the door as they piled into Joyce's car and disappeared.

"Close the door, kid, you're letting cold air in," her dad's voice called.

She obeyed, and he added, "Come sit by me a minute. Then it's time for pajamas and bed." He patted the sofa next to him.

She sat, but didn't look at him or lean close to him as she usually did. She's uncomfortable, he registered. Time to bite the bullet and talk about the elephant in the room. Baby steps, he told himself.

"Do you, um, have any questions about what you saw?" He asked, praying the answer was no. Just say no, give me a good night hug, and go to bed. Yes, that would be perfect. He could tell by her pensive expression that wasn't happening.

"Is Joyce your girlfriend now?" Seriously, he thought, we are back to that. He figured being honest was the best he could do, though even he wasn't sure of the answer.

"I really don't know. We haven't talked about it."

"Is it complicated? Not easy?" She asked.

Not as complicated as I thought, he realized. Considering how her hands were all over me, I'm quite confident she feels the same way I do. He didn't think Jane needed all of those details though. Best to keep his answers to her as simple as possible.

"A little complicated, yes. I do like Joyce and I think she likes me."

Jane nodded, "Oh she does, Dad! You were kissing."

"Yes, well, about that...." and he stopped, having no idea what to say next. "We sort of got, uh, caught up." I'm not handling this well now, he thought. He was stumbling over his words, "Those kinds of things should be done in private, understand? Private means not in front of other people."

She was looking at him with a furrowed brow, deep in thought. "You said me and Mike shouldn't."

"Definitely not!" This part, I can make clear, he thought. No gray area here. "Joyce and I are adults. You and Mike are not. That's the difference." Period, end of story.

"But we can kiss? Just not have our grubby hands all over each other?"

"First, please stop saying that. Pretty sure we went over that after the Snow Ball."

She nodded and wanted to point out that she was only saying that

because she didn't know what else to call it. But he was still talking so she didn't get the chance.

"Second, you and Mike are too young to be kissing, or, uh, doing anything else like that."

"How old until I can kiss him again?"

Hopper's head was in his hands, and he was rubbing his forehead. The word "again" reminded him that his daughter and that boy had already kissed. He considered banning her from ever seeing him again though he knew that wasn't feasible.

"I don't know, Janie," he said, fighting his instinct to tell her at least age 25. "There's no magic number. Just don't worry about kissing and all that right now, okay? You are both very young."

He knew that answer was vague and she usually demanded more concrete responses. She seemed to accept it, thankfully. He sensed that he could wrap up the conversation, knowing she would bring it up again if she had more questions. Goodness knows she never hesitated to ask questions, even ones other kids would be far too embarrassed to ask their parents.

"Tell you what," he said, helping her up off the couch, "Go brush your teeth and put on your pajamas. I'll come read *The Night Before Christmas* when you're in bed. It's a Christmas Eve tradition."

"But they heard him exclaim, ere he drove out of sight, Happy Christmas to all and to all a good night," he finished, closing the book.

"Loved that story, Dad! It rhymed."

"Ready to go to sleep? Santa can't come if you're awake, remember," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

She frowned, "Santa is made up."

"Yes but it's still fun to pretend. And there will be some presents under the tree and in your stocking when you wake up. IF You go to sleep," he said, kissing her forehead and turning out the light.

He stretched out on the couch with a beer and the radio, waiting until he was sure she was asleep before playing Santa. Never thought I'd be doing this again, he thought, putting treats in her stocking and placing wrapped gifts under the tree. I hope it's enough, he began second guessing himself. Hard to compete with that bike from earlier. He had gone for quantity, wanting her to have lots of presents to open and he felt good about everything he'd chosen. He had asked Flo to do the wrapping, telling her the gifts were for nieces and nephews. Snowball jumped onto the couch, reminding him that she was part of Jane's Christmas. Oh yes, and even a bike couldn't outdo the kitten. Point to Dad, he congratulated himself.

Realizing Jane would wake up early, he headed to bed. He couldn't wait to see her face in the morning and watch her open the presents. I'm as excited as a kid, he chuckled to himself. He fell asleep with a smile on his face, remembering how nice those few minutes on the porch with Joyce had been. Complicated? Probably. Worth it? Definitely.

17. Chapter 17- Christmas Day

Still having snow days so here's another chapter! People were asking for more Mike/Eleven so I had to think about how to get them in the same place again. This chapter is Jopper heavy though it starts Jane/Dad Hopper on Christmas. I'll work on more Mileven for Chapter 18. Thank you for reading and reviewing!

"Snowball likes the paper," Jane observed, as the kitten jumped among the tattered remains of wrapping paper littering the cabin floor. When Jane had first begun opening presents, she removed the wrapping carefully, wanting to make the experience last as long as possible. After a couple of gifts, though, she was tearing into each gift with eager excitement.

"Be sure none of the presents are underneath all that mess," Hopper said from his spot on the couch where he was sipping his coffee. "I don't want to accidentally throw any of them away."

"Presents are there," she said, pointing to the coffee table. It was stacked with books, puzzles, art supplies, a Rubik's Cube, and her other toys and gifts.

"Oh, Dad," Jane remembered, jumping up off the floor, "I forgot your presents! Close your eyes."

"You got me a present?" He wondered, knowing she had never been shopping.

"Made them myself! Two presents." She announced proudly. "Close your eyes. Please."

He closed his eyes and she ran into her room, returning with her hands behind her back. What in the world could this be, he thought.

"You can open your eyes now. Please." He opened them and she presented him with a drawing she had done. It clearly showed the two of them in their cabin, with Snowball depicted too. Across the top, she had written in colorful lettering, "Family."

"Wow, honey, this is beautiful. I think it's my favorite present I've ever gotten," he said, looking at the picture. Family, huh. He felt a lump in his throat and some dust in his eyes. He sniffed and stood up, going to put the picture on the refrigerator with a magnet.

"Wait, I said two presents," she took his hand and wrapped a black friendship bracelet around his wrist, tying it carefully.

"Like it?" She asked, looking to him for his reaction.

Dang allergies, he thought, wiping his nose and eyes absentmindedly. Or maybe it's the pine smell from the tree making my eyes water.

"I love it, Janie," he said, pulling her into a hug. This is a pretty great Christmas, and I have one great kid, he was thinking as he wrapped his arms around her.

"Okay, let's get this cleaned up," he gestured to the paper and boxes all over the floor while taking his coffee cup to the sink.

"Snowball likes it," she replied, watching the kitten bat at the wads of crinkly paper.

"I know, but we need to be getting ready for Joyce's soon and I don't want to leave this mess."

Jane continued balling up the paper scraps and tossing them for Snowball to try and catch.

"Hey, kid, time to get the paper up," Hopper said from his spot in the kitchen. She didn't answer. He turned off the water, thinking he hadn't heard her.

He turned slightly to see her still playing with the cat and the messy paper.

"You hear me, honey?" He said a bit louder. Okay, she had to have heard that. But she didn't respond.

"Jane," he tried again with no reply from her. Please don't do this on Christmas, he silently pleaded. He had no desire for a disagreement today and even less desire to dole out punishment. Don't ignore me,

he begged her with his eyes. He cleared his throat.

"Yes," she answered, keeping her eyes on Snowball.

Whew, he felt relieved that she finally acknowledged him, maybe this won't escalate.

She was rooted firmly on the spot where she sat cross legged and did not look at him. He felt his patience waning. It's Christmas, he told himself, stay calm.

Deep breaths. Just get her attention so we can go about the rest of the day.

"Did you hear what I said? You need to be cleaning up," he said with no room for interpretation, then added, "Now please."

"Yes, sir," she answered. Now we're talking, Hopper thought. She's answering and being polite about it. But, she still was not moving or making any attempt to do what he was saying. Now he was confused.

"Okay, then do it..." he really didn't know why she was still sitting there.

"Yes, sir, heard you. That's what I meant. But don't want to clean."

He didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She thinks if she's respectful, she can just not do what I say. He shook his head. I don't think so, kid. I'm going to explain this calmly. No tantrums on Christmas.

"Thank you for nice manners. Now you need to do what I was asking you to do. I'll help too," he offered, bending down to start gathering some of the trash.

"Dad, no! That's Snowball's favorite part!" Snowball is going to have to get over it, he said to himself.

"Hey," he said calmly, shaking his head, "We've talked about this, haven't we?" Point to me, he thought. I've come a long way since the days of yelling at her to the point where she's blowing out the windows with anger.

He was met with a pouting teen with her arms crossed, clearly not wanting to comply, however.

"Okay, kid," giving this one more try before completely losing his temper, "We have to leave in just a little while for lunch at the Byers'. If you're not going to listen to me, I'll call and tell Joyce we aren't coming. It's your choice."

She shook her head and began reluctantly picking up the paper.

"Thank you," he said, resisting the urge to tell her to obey him the first time from now on. No need to poke the bear. He opted instead to ask, "Is there something you should say to me?"

"Sorry, Dad," she said quietly. "Sorry I didn't want to clean up."

"Thank you, honey. I know it isn't fun. But you need to remember to do what I say."

"I know," she said, hugging him.

"She didn't really say that, did she?" Joyce was doubled over, she was laughing so hard.

"Yes!" Hopper said, cracking up too, "She said yes, sir, I heard you. But I don't want to do what you're telling me to! I mean, how am I even supposed to respond to that?" He was laughing and shaking his head.

"At least she was polite about it," Joyce said, still in stitches.

He agreed, continuing to laugh, "Baby steps. Maybe."

They were sitting at her kitchen table, having finished lunch. Will and Jane were in Will's room, comparing Christmas presents and playing. Jonathan was on the phone with Nancy, again. He stuck his head around the corner, holding his hand over the receiver and asked, "Is it okay if Nancy comes over, please?"

"She knows you're not allowed to go anywhere, right?" Joyce said.

"Yes, Mom," Jonathan answered, fighting the instinct to roll his eyes, "We are just going to talk here. So, can she come over?"

"Her parents are alright with that? On Christmas Day?"

"They're going to their grandparents for dinner so she has to be home by 5:00. Is it okay? Please Mom. She's barely talked to me since, you know." He was getting impatient, looking at the clock.

"I guess so," she said, not sounding too convinced. That was good enough for Jonathan, who immediately got back on the line and told Nancy.

Joyce sighed and looked back at Hopper. "I thought parenting was hard when my boys were little. It's much harder when they are teenagers. No one tells you that."

Hopper said in all seriousness, "You and those boys have been through more than most parents can even imagine."

"Things were easier when a few well placed pops on their backside was all it took."

Hopper chuckled at that, then reached across the table and took her hand.

"So," she began, sensing the change in tone. "Are we going to talk about last night?"

"What about it?" He asked, teasing her.

"Hmm, I don't know," she replied, raising her eyebrows, "Our kids and their friends catching us on your porch? Ring any bells?"

"Oh, yes. I vaguely remember now that you mention it," he winked, rubbing her hand with his.

"Stop being silly. Don't you think we need to talk about it?" She asked, looking only mildly annoyed.

"We can talk about what a good kisser you are," he said casually. "Can't believe I had forgotten."

She smacked his hand that was holding hers. "Sssh, stop talking like that. What if the kids heard you?"

"Considering they saw it with their own eyes, it probably wouldn't shock them that much. Of course, Jonathan wasn't there but I'm betting Will told him."

"Ugh, stop it," she groaned, running her hands through her hair. "I don't want to visualize my kids talking about it!"

"My kid asked if you were my girlfriend now."

"Did she? And what was your response?"

"I told her I didn't know. But that I was pretty sure we like each other."

"Like each other? Are you going to save me a seat on the bus and try to hold my hand in class?" She asked, laughing.

"I was trying to keep it on Jane's level, smart ass. Did Will say anything about it?"

She shook her head. "He went straight to the shower and bed when we got home. Then this morning, it was all about Christmas presents. I'm certain he's relieved I haven't brought it up." She had gotten up and was clearing the last of the dishes. He followed suit. Standing at the sink, he put his hand on her back and she turned, her features serious.

"I don't know if I can keep doing this. Whatever this is," she said quietly.

"What do you mean?" He asked, looking worried. Is she going to dump me before we are even a couple? That sounds about right, given my track record with women.

"Jim, don't play dumb. This flirting, and touching each other, and then what happened last night...I don't even know what this is."

He let out an exasperated breath. Why do women always want to talk everything to death? Does it matter what we call it? Can't we just

enjoy each other? He rubbed his chin in thought.

"What if we went out?" He asked, "On a real date. Would you feel better about whatever 'this' is then?"

She hadn't expected that. "Well, I don't know," she stammered. He had caught her off guard.

It's now or never, he thought. "Joyce, you can't deny there's something between us.

We are grown adults. Let's just try going out. See where things go from there?"

"We could do that," she said, looking cautious.

"Gee, don't sound so excited. You'll inflate a guy's ego," he said in mock hurt.

"Let me try that again," she corrected herself. "I'd love to go out with you."

Before they could make plans, they were interrupted by Will and Jane entering the kitchen.

"Mom, can we get a Coke?" Will asked.

"Yes, honey, that's fine," she answered, her mind still on her previous conversation.

Will opened the refrigerator and handed one to Jane, who looked first to her dad and asked, "Is it okay?"

"Yeah, sure," he said, also clearly distracted.

They all turned at the sound of a car pulling into their driveway and Jonathan announcing, "Nancy is here!"

Hopper leaned over and whispered to Joyce, "We'll continue this conversation later."

"I'm holding you to that, chief," she answered, turning to greet Nancy.

Jonathan was opening the front door when a loud voice proclaimed, "Mike!"

Jane was the first to notice that Nancy hadn't come alone. Great, thought Hopper, I cannot get away from that kid, and he watched his daughter run to hug the boy as if she had not just seen him the night before.

"I need a beer," he mumbled, turning to go back into the kitchen.

18. Chapter 18- Christmas Day

"Mo-om!" Will's voice resounded loudly. Joyce and Hopper had been enjoying a few minutes of peace and quiet, a rare feat considering there were currently five teenagers in the house.

Will ran into the living room, followed by Mike, Jane, and Jonathan, with Nancy trailing a few steps behind. Hopper dislodged his arm from around Joyce's shoulders, and she sat up from her position, which had been leaning against him.

"Mom!" Will began, catching his breath. "Tell Jonathan to let us use his room. Mike and Jane and I want to listen to music and he has the good stereo."

"Mom, please make them leave us alone," Jonathan begged his mother in an exasperated tone. "Nancy and I were talking and they just burst in my room."

"You can talk anywhere," Will said. "We need your room for the stereo."

"It's MY room."

"Okay, truce," Joyce said, getting up and throwing Hopper an apologetic look.

"Jonathan, you and Nancy can go back in your room. Keep the door open."

"Mom, I don't want them eavesdropping," Jonathan argued. "The door was closed until they opened it!"

"Oh gross," said Will, "Like we care about listening to what you're saying."

"The door stays open, and it should have been open the whole time," Joyce reminded Jonathan. "That's always been a rule in this house."

Nancy grabbed Jonathan's hand saying, "Come on, you don't need to get in anymore trouble." He wasn't about to argue with Nancy so he

turned and followed her back into his room, making a point of leaving the door halfway open.

"What are we supposed to do now?" Will asked.

"Let's go outside," Mike suggested, looking at Will and Jane.

"I'm not sure about that," Hopper spoke up. "Jane is supposed to be laying low. Someone may see and wonder who she is."

"I think it's okay, Hop," said Joyce after a moment's thought. "No one is going to question an extra kid running around playing on Christmas."

Jane was looking hopefully at him and he couldn't disappoint her, not on Christmas. Kid stays inside 99 percent of the time, let her play outside for once, he thought.

"Alright," he reluctantly agreed. "Be sure to wear your coat. And if you see anything suspicious, come right back in. And don't go far from the house."

"We'll be good, Dad!" Jane said excitedly, giving him a kiss on his cheek and running to get her coat.

The three kids were out the door in a flash. Jane took a deep breath of the cold, crisp air. She loved getting to be outside. She was the only person Mike had ever known that was content just looking at the sky. And he loved watching her, taking in her surroundings and marveling at the smallest things. He must have been obvious in his gazing at her, because Will broke the silence, saying, "So, what do you guys want to do?"

"Tag, you're it," yelled Mike, tagging Will and taking off running, pulling Jane along by the hand. They ran until they were all out of breath, collapsing on the sidewalk laughing.

"I let you two get away," Will boasted.

"Oh, yeah, right, whatever," Mike teased back. "You were never even close to us!"

"I was about to catch up when you called that fire hydrant was base. Which was totally unfair. No one likes a cheater," said Will, but he was laughing and smiling.

"Hide and seek next, you're it," called Will, tagging Mike. Mike played right along, covering his eyes and counting.

"Want to come with me?" Will whispered to Jane.

"No, I can do it," Jane answered. "Let's go!" And she and Will started running in opposite directions, leaving Mike to count.

Jane ran until she found a tree, far away from where she had started, and stood behind it, proud of herself for finding a hiding spot on her own. She waited quietly, listening carefully for any sounds of Will or Mike. She heard nothing but silence. I am really good at this game, she thought. Jane enjoyed the sounds around her, birds and squirrels, cars in the distance, leaves rustling. She noticed a few minutes had gone by and she heard nothing from Mike or Will. A cold breeze blew around her and she shivered a little. I am not going to get scared, she told herself. This is just a game and Mike will be here any second. Mike will always find me. He didn't give up on me for 353 days. He won't give up on me now. Even as she was telling herself that, she sank to the ground, her back to the tree. She wrapped her arms around her knees and waited, her breathing reverberating in her ears. Now every little sound was magnified around her. Tears began welling in her eyes, and she put her head down, taking deep breaths to try and stop herself from crying. It was no use, the tears fell as her fears rose. What if she was really lost?

Suddenly she heard someone yelling, "El! Eleven!" and she recognized Mike's voice. She jumped up from her spot at the base of the tree, and screamed back, "Mike! Mike!"

"Don't run, El! Stay where you are. Keep yelling and we're coming!"

"Mike, I'm here! Please come, I'm scared!"

Mike appeared, running toward her, Will close on his heels. Mike fell into Jane's arms, where she cried and gripped him with all of her might. He held her and closed his eyes, thankful beyond words they

had found her.

"I'm so sorry, Jane. I'm so sorry you got scared. I was so scared when we couldn't find you," his voice was cracking.

Will was leaning over, hands on his knees catching his breath and apologizing, "I should have hidden with her. I'm really sorry," and it was all he could do to hold in his tears.

"You're cold," Mike said, not breaking their embrace and rubbing her back. "Can we walk back to the house now? Is that okay?"

She nodded, suddenly really wanting to see her dad and be in the safety of Will's warm house. "Stay with me, Mike?"

"Of course," he said, taking his arms from around her and holding her hand. "I won't let go. I promise."

"Promise," she agreed, nodding and walking carefully with Mike, Will just behind them.

They made it to Will's house and as soon as Will opened the door, Jane ran to her father and collapsed onto him, sobbing into his chest where he was, still sitting on the couch.

Joyce looked anxiously at the two boys and asked, "What in the world happened?" as she put her arm protectively around Will.

"Someone want to tell me why my daughter is crying?" Hopper demanded, holding her tight while glaring at the boys, waiting for an explanation.

Mike was the first to speak, his voice shaking, "We were playing hide and seek and it took us, uh, a little bit longer to find her."

"Where was she?" Hopper asked, his features unwavering. He tightened his arms around Jane as she continued to cry and hold on to him for dear life.

"Behind a tree," Jane mumbled into his chest.

"Didn't I say to stay close to the house?" He said roughly, looking

down at her, panicking at the thought of her being lost in the woods.

"It wasn't far," said Mike, his voice cracking as it was taking all of his resolve not to cry. I've screwed up again, he thought. Chief is going to cut me off from seeing her. Just the thought had tears threatening to come to the surface and a lump in his throat. "It was only a few minutes. Though it felt like a lot longer," his voice trailed off at the end.

"Far enough and long enough, apparently," Hopper noted, more than a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

"It was my fault," offered Will, his voice also shaking. "I should have stayed with her. I shouldn't have let her hide by herself."

"Yes, not staying together was your first mistake," Joyce agreed, her arm still around Will. "Hide and seek probably wasn't a good choice of game to play."

Hopper had his eyes closed and his chin resting on Jane's curly hair. She's here and she's safe, he repeated in his head.

"Chief, Sir," Mike spoke in a trembling voice, "I'm really sorry. I just want you to know, I would never put her in danger. It was a stupid game. I'm so sorry," and he covered his face with his hands, unable to stop his emotions.

He looks like a wreck, Hopper realized, fixing Mike with a hard glare. I told him I'm not the enemy, well, time to take your own advice, Dad. He's not the enemy either. He'd rather die than hurt my daughter. It just seems like whenever something happens with Jane, he is right there. I guess that is not likely to change in the future, he told himself. He spotted the black friendship bracelet on the boy's wrist, identical to the one on his own. Yeah, this kid is not going anywhere.

"Hey, Wheeler," said the chief from where he sat, since Jane was not letting him move at the moment. She still had a firm lock around him.

Mike tentatively sniffed, took a deep breath, and moved his hands

from his face. "Yes, sir?"

"It's okay. No one is in trouble. You found her and brought her back safe. No more hide and seek, though."

Mike nodded, not trusting himself to answer without breaking down.

"And if I'm not around, never let her out of your sight," Hopper added. Maybe I should see him as an ally, he figured. Use it to my, and Jane's, advantage that he is almost as protective of her as I am. And it's obvious he's scared to death of me. If I tell him to always have an eye on her, he will do it.

"Yes, sir, I promise, I never will," Mike answered.

Joyce was next to speak. "How about some hot chocolate, kids? It'll warm you up."

"How does that sound?" Hopper looked down and asked Jane. She had not let go from around his waist since running in the door. "You love hot chocolate."

She nodded and slowly pulled away from him, then asked tentatively, "Are you mad at me?"

I can't be mad at her when she has just been scared in the woods, he realized. And I don't see her doing that again.

"No, kid, just worried. And it makes me sad to see you scared. So don't ever go off by yourself, even if someone says it's part of a game. It's a rule, buddy system, always."

"I got it, Dad," she agreed, wiping her face. "Mike can be my buddy!"

Big surprise there, Hopper said to himself with a snicker. He watched the three of them at Joyce's table with their hot chocolate and he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around to see Joyce waving at him.

"Hi," she said. "I'm still waiting for details on that date."

"Oh, I thought you didn't want to talk about such things where the kids may hear," he responded with pretend shock.

"They're not paying a bit of attention to us," she said, gesturing to the kids at the table.

"They weren't even in the same room earlier when you told me to stop talking about what a good kisser you are."

"Sshh, there you go again!" She scolded him.

"Wait, what am I supposed to do with Jane when we go out?" Hopper realized he had not thought of that before.

"Bring her here. Nancy can come over. She and Jonathan can babysit Will and Jane. I'm sure Nancy would be happy to, and Jonathan isn't going anywhere so he would welcome the chance to see her again."

"That should work. How about Friday night? I'll pick you up at 7:00."

"So, we are really doing this, huh?" Joyce asked, suddenly feeling nervous.

"That's the idea. Did you think I wasn't serious?" Great, he thought, she's backing out. Cold feet.

"I'll be ready at 7:00," she said with a smile. Then she turned and called for Jonathan and Nancy to come into the kitchen.

They came around the corner and Joyce said, "Would you two mind babysitting Will and Jane Friday night?"

"Mom!" Will said indignantly, "We are too old for a babysitter!"

"I don't care what you call it, there's no way we are leaving you two here alone. So we can just say Jonathan and Nancy will be here too," Joyce replied.

"Sure," said Nancy amiably. "We'll just hang out, okay, Will? No need to say we are babysitting," she added.

"Can I come?" Asked Mike hopefully. Should have seen that coming, thought Hopper. He decided to respond right away.

"I'll have to think about that. No promises."

"Why, Dad? Why do we need a babysitter? I mean, a not babysitter," asked Jane.

"So Joyce and I can go to dinner," he responded, hoping she wasn't going to press him for details in front of all of these other kids.

"Mike, we need to get going," Nancy had just noticed the time. "Mom and Dad will kill us if we are late getting home. We have to go to Grandma and Grandpa's for dinner."

"I know," Mike said glumly, obviously not ready to leave.

"Come on, kiddo," Nancy said, pushing hm toward the door. "Bye, Jonathan. See you Friday."

"Goodbye, Jane," Mike said over his shoulder.

"Bye, Mike! I hope you can come on Friday when Nancy and Jonathan are not babysitting us!"

Hopper just shook his head.

19. Chapter 19- Joyce

"Jonathan! Will you take the dinner out of the oven?" Joyce yelled from her bathroom, where she was getting ready for her night out.

"Got it, Mom!" He answered.

When Joyce had talked to Hopper on the phone the day before, she had convinced him to bring Jane at 6:30 so she could have dinner before their date.

"Please let me feed your daughter something that isn't Eggos or pizza or a TV dinner," she had said.

"Hey, that's not all I feed her. Sometimes I get Kentucky Fried Chicken," he retorted.

"Oh, forgive my mistake," she had replied, laughing. "Humor me and allow me to give her a home cooked meal tomorrow night?"

"See you at 6:30," had been his response.

Joyce put some finishing touches on her makeup, regarding herself in the mirror. She put her hands on the side of her cheeks and pulled back, tightening her face. Too bad I can't freeze it that way, she thought. I guess this is as good as it gets, she thought, letting her face back into its natural position. She sighed and put on lipstick, and added some more hairspray to her loose curls. What am I even doing worrying about what I look like. Jim Hopper has seen me at my absolute worst. He's seen me out of my mind with worry and grief and fear. He's seen me pouring sweat from burning a monster out of my son. She had no explanation for the butterflies in her stomach and no reason to be nervous. But she was. Tonight was different. Two single parents going on a date, no horrors to fight or children to save. She hadn't been out since Bob and the memory of how that ended tugged at her heart. Sweet Bob had gotten caught up in the terror they were battling and had paid with his life. She knew he would want her to be happy, and she knew he liked Hopper. That made this a little easier.

And recently, she and Hopper had bonded over their kids, which made this seem even more natural. Their lives were similar, raising teenagers. They were there for each other's parenting highs and lows. Tonight was about them, however. She heard the doorbell ring and found herself smiling.

Will had opened the door and was greeting Jane and Hopper.

"Joyce! You look pretty," Jane complimented. "Dad looks nice too. He took a shower and he smells good."

Joyce laughed a little, saying, "Thanks for cleaning up and smelling good, Hop. I'm honored."

"Nancy and Mike will be here soon," said Will.

Jane's face lit up. "Mike too?" She asked, looking at her dad.

"Yeah, I gave in on that one. I hope I don't regret it. I'm trusting all of you to behave tonight, understand?"

"Yes, Dad! We will behave, promise!"

Hopper did not feel convinced but he looked at her said, "I'm holding you to that. Though it's that boy I'm worried about."

"It's okay," Joyce assured him. "Nancy and Jonathan will be here. Nothing is going to happen. Now come on and eat, Jane. It's not even a TV dinner," she said with a wink at Hopper.

Nancy and Jonathan are teenagers too, Hopper thought. He told himself to stop worrying and said, "She's had plenty of home cooked meals, I'll have you know."

"Um, hmm, I'm sure," Joyce replied, rolling her eyes.

Hopper felt a tug on his hand and he looked down to see Jane regarding him with a worried expression. "What's wrong, kid?" He asked her.

Jane crooked her finger, motioning for him to lean down. He did and she whispered in his ear, "What if I don't like dinner?"

"You have to try everything. If you don't like something, that's okay but you need to be polite about it," he responded.

She nodded and followed Jonathan and Will into the kitchen.

"Mom, Will and Jane can go ahead. I want to wait for Nancy," said Jonathan.

Joyce had made a chicken and rice casserole with broccoli on the side. "Ooh, I love this stuff, Mom!" Will said, eyeing his plate.

"Joyce, you went to too much trouble. Tonight should have been a night off from cooking," Hopper said.

"It's not hard to make, really. And it's one of my boys' favorites so I figured Jane would like it too."

"Broccoli isn't one of my favorites," Will whispered to Jane, snickering.

"I heard that, mister," Joyce noted, even though her back was turned, pouring glasses of milk. "And you're going to eat it, favorite or not."

"I know," Will replied, looking embarrassed.

Jane was digging into the chicken and rice, obviously enjoying it. She had also already finished one roll and was reaching for another from the basket when she heard her dad clear his throat. He had noticed she had not touched the broccoli.

"Not your favorite either, huh?" Will asked her sympathetically.

"Don't know," Jane replied, wrinkling her nose. "Never had it." She was quite sure she didn't like the look of it, though.

Joyce pinned Hopper with an accusing glare at hearing what Jane had said. "Really, Hop. She's a growing girl. She needs vegetables."

"She eats plenty of vegetables AND fruit, thank you very much. Not always without argument. Just because I've never made broccoli doesn't mean I'm stunting her growth or something," he said, crossing his arms, feeling proud of himself. "I also give her a Flintstones

multivitamin every morning." So take that. Point to Hopper.

"I like the purple vitamins best," Jane contributed happily, still ignoring the green on her plate.

"I stand corrected," Joyce admitted. "Good job, Dad," she added, patting Hopper on the shoulder.

"I'm still waiting for her to eat the broccoli, though," he made a point of keeping his eyes on Jane.

"Think I'm full," Jane said seriously, pushing her chair back and patting her stomach. Joyce suppressed a laugh, turning around to the sink to avoid eye contact.

Hopper raised an eyebrow at Jane and shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Nice try," Will said kindly to Jane. He knew the "I'm full" tactic quite well from his own attempts at it. "Hey, I have an idea," he suddenly remembered.

Will went to the refrigerator and came back to the table with the green container of parmesan cheese. Jane looked intrigued. She'd had that on spaghetti before but didn't know why Will had gotten it out now.

"This helps," he said, sprinkling some on his own broccoli and taking a big bite. Soon he had eaten it all. "Try it," he encouraged Jane.

Jane was unsure but followed Will's lead. She made a face and looked to her dad. "Tried it," she said, grimacing as the one bite went down.

"One more bite," Hopper replied.

She sighed and did what he said, then looking relieved she asked, "May I be excused?"

Hopper nodded his approval, then whispered something in her ear. Jane took her dishes to the sink and said, "Thank you for dinner, Joyce."

"You're welcome honey," Joyce answered sweetly.

"Kids are fed, so you ready to get going?" she asked Hopper expectantly.

"I kind of wanted to wait for the other two to be here. You know, go over the rules with everyone," Hopper answered, looking anxious.

She looked a little exasperated but nodded slightly. She went and sat on the couch, watching the door. Oh no, thought Hopper, she's put out with me. She was ready to go and I am making her wait. Thankfully he heard Nancy and Mike pull into the driveway.

Jonathan opened the door, happy to see Nancy. Since he was on lockdown and school was out for the holidays, he had not seen her since Christmas Day.

Mike came in right behind her, a huge grin the moment he spotted Jane. "Hi, Mike," she said, hugging him.

"Have you had dinner?" Jonathan asked Nancy. "I waited for you."

She looked apologetic and said, "We ate but I'll come keep you company."

That was good enough for him, and she followed him into the kitchen.

"Everyone come in here a minute so I can go over some things then we will get going," Hopper announced. Jonathan was sitting at the table, eating, Nancy next to him. Mike, Will, and Jane gathered close to the table.

Hopper began, "Here are the rules. No one goes outside. The front door stays locked. All inside doors stay open," he looked at Mike at that point. He could just picture that kid getting Jane alone in a room to do God knows what. Not happening, he thought.

"No boy/girl couples. Stay in groups of three, no less," he added as an afterthought. That will prevent any making out, he realized, proud of himself for thinking of it.

"Wait," Jonathan interjected, frowning. "That means Nancy and I can't be alone? At all?"

"You're babysitting, not on a date," Joyce corrected. "And if those are the chief's rules, you'll follow them, right? You can be in groups of two if both are boys or both are girls. So, Jane and Nancy can get some girl time, for example. Or you can hang out with Mike or Will." She pinned her oldest son with a hard look. She knew that spending time with Mike and Will wasn't what he meant when he questioned the chief's rule.

Will rolled his eyes at the babysitting reference, and Mike elbowed him to stop. Mike wasn't going to risk anything jeopardizing his time with Jane, even if they couldn't be alone.

"Mom, come on, don't you think that's a little over the top?" Jonathan was trying to be respectful but he thought the rule of staying in groups of three was ridiculous.

The chief started to speak but Joyce beat him to it. "Follow the rules or Nancy and Mike go home now," Joyce said firmly.

"Okay, okay, we will," Jonathan backed down.

Hopper helped Joyce on with her coat as they made their way to the front door.

"Remember to lock this behind us," Hopper reminded the kids.

"I'll do it right now," said Nancy as the adults stepped outside to leave.

As Nancy was closing the door, Hopper stuck his head back in and announced, "One more rule. No hide and seek." And with that, the door was closed and locked.

20. Chapter 20- Date

"More wine?" The waiter asked.

Hopper declined, saying, "No, thank you, I'm driving, but you can bring the lady another glass."

When the waiter had retreated, Joyce quirked an eyebrow at Hopper and asked, "Are you trying to get me drunk and have your way with me?"

Damn, she's flirting again, he thought. And she's good at it. He felt himself flush when she talked like that. He cleared his throat, trying to clear his head as well. Keep it cool, he told himself. "If two glasses of wine at dinner get you drunk, then yes. Somehow I doubt that though."

They were sitting in a secluded booth at the nicest Italian restaurant in town. Which considering the size of Hawkins, wasn't saying much, but it was still a good place for a dinner date. The lights were low and the flickering candles bathed everyone in a soft glow. Hopper was enjoying the effect, admiring Joyce's delicate features and sparkling eyes. I've thought this girl was pretty for 20 years, he realized. And to him, she hadn't aged a bit.

Joyce twirled a fettuccine noodle around her fork and took a sip of her red wine. "It sure is nice to enjoy a meal without telling anyone to eat their veggies or breaking up arguments over whose turn it is to do the dishes."

"I can start a fight with someone about the dishes if it makes you feel more at home. And I already ate salad so I got my vegetables in," he teased.

"I'll pass. I get enough of that at home. But thanks for the offer," she said, laughing.

He took a bite of his lasagna and drained the last bit of wine from his own glass.

"I was thinking that after we leave here," he said, "We could walk a couple of blocks to that place that has live music on the weekends. Unless you're in a hurry to get home, that is."

"I'm not in a hurry," she answered, smiling at him. "I'm having a good time."

That was plenty of reassurance for him. "Me, too," he said.

Jonathan's arm was around Nancy's shoulders as they sat on the couch, watching TV and monitoring the Monopoly game happening on the floor in front of them. Nancy marveled at her brother's kindness and patience in helping Jane.

"Okay, you have enough to buy that property, don't you?" He asked her as she fingered the colorful money in her hand.

She nodded and paid Will, placing the house on her newly acquired space. "Now if one of us lands on that, we have to pay you."

"Why?" She asked.

"Because your house is there. We would owe you rent."

She agreed though she didn't fully understand. The game seemed very involved to her but she was having fun so she didn't complain.

"Pay up, Mike! That's my hotel," Will gloated, holding out his hand for Mike to pay him.

"Aw, shit," Mike grumbled, reluctantly counting out what he owed Will.

"Mike!" Jane exclaimed, looking incredulous. "Bad word!"

Will laughed at Mike being scolded by his girlfriend. Mike cut his eyes at Will, resisting the urge to tell him to shut up. Jane would surely call him out again if he did.

"No cussing around Jane," Will reminded him. "Chief's orders."

Mike leaned across the game board to smack Will's shoulder, inadvertently knocking over an almost full can of Coke in the process. Jane quickly waved her hand, the drink righting itself just before it spilled. She looked guilty, once she realized what she had done instinctively.

"Wow," Will said softly. They had all seen Jane's powers in action but somehow seeing them in such a mundane setting made it even more amazing.

"Don't tell my dad," Jane admitted sheepishly. "Not supposed to do that."

"But it's so cool!" Will exclaimed. "If I could do that, I'd be using it to clean my room and all of my other chores."

"Oh no, against the rules," Jane explained, shaking her head. Then she appeared to be thinking hard and added, "Wait. Is cleaning your room a 'matter of life and death'? Dad says powers are okay then."

"Um, it's not really life and death, no." Will chuckled.

"Don't be so sure about that," Jonathan added in a sarcastic tone, laughing while ribbing his brother. "Your room gets pretty dirty."

"Powers are okay if life and death," Jane said definitively.

"I think we can all agree that a spilled Coke doesn't fall into that category so no one needs to mention this to the chief, agreed? If Jane isn't supposed to use her powers, we don't want her to get in trouble," Nancy said. She looked at Jonathan and noted, "We probably shouldn't let them have those Cokes on the floor. It's an accident waiting to happen." She got up and started gathering the sodas and carrying them to the kitchen.

Mike rolled his eyes and said, "You're not Mom, Nancy. So don't talk about us like we're little kids. I'm not Holly."

"Excuse me for not wanting a bunch of Coke spilled everywhere on my watch. Jonathan and I are in charge, you know," Nancy called from the kitchen.

Mike scowled and replied, "Ugh, you're so bossy. You're not even that

much older than us."

"Older enough, little brother," she said with a smile. She did like being in charge.

"You know what? Maybe Mom needs to hear that you were totally drunk on Halloween and Jonathan sneaked you home, huh?" Mike challenged. Take that, he thought.

Nancy whirled around from where she had been cleaning up the kitchen, her mouth gaping wide open. "You little jerk, how do you even know that?!" She demanded.

Mike looked smug and answered casually, "We heard you and Jonathan talking about it on Christmas."

"I knew you were listening to our conversation!" Came Jonathan's voice in the other room, directing the accusation at Will.

"We weren't listening. You guys were talking loud! We couldn't help it," Will retorted.

"Go ahead and tell Mom. Doesn't bother me. It was months ago," Nancy said, shrugging. She was hoping and praying Mike didn't call her bluff. She definitely did not want her mom to know that information.

"Okay, I will," Mike replied matter of factly.

Nancy turned on her heel and stomped down the hall, grabbing her purse and calling, "Come on Jane, let's have some girl time."

Joyce's head was resting under Hopper's chin as they swayed slowly to the music. It felt to both of them like a perfect fit. The bar was dark, smokey, and not crowded, much to Hopper's liking. He was thankful to avoid prying eyes and gossip. He leaned over her, pulling her closer to his body.

"Mmm," she sighed. He could feel her breath against his chest. God, that could drive me crazy, he thought. Crazy in a good way of course. She had one hand at his shoulder, the other clasping his hand at their

sides. She took that hand and wrapped it around his waist, letting it rest at the small of his back. He pressed his lips on the top of her head and she sighed again, her mouth turning up into a lazy smile. She looked up and their eyes locked. That was all the encouragement he needed. He bent down and kissed the side of her mouth, then moved to capture her lips with his own. He felt her response instantly, her arms encircling his neck, her mouth gently returning the kiss. The song ended and the lights in the bar came up, signaling a break for the band. Hopper reluctantly broke their embrace, keeping her hand in his as they walked back to their table.

They each lit a cigarette and sat a moment in comfortable silence. It was easy to be together, the most natural thing in the world, it occurred to Hopper. He couldn't contain the sly smile that spread across his face, just looking at Joyce. She ran her hands through her hair and commented, "I wouldn't have figured you for the slow dance type. Or any dancing for that matter."

He scoffed at her notion what they had been doing was actually dancing. It really was no more than moving slowly together.

"What you just saw was the extent of my dancing. Notice I didn't move much."

"Still, it felt like dancing to me," she said, her eyes locked on his. "Thanks for tonight, Hop. I know a 'real date' might be a little out of your comfort zone."

"I wanted to show you I can do more than sit around one of our houses, our kids scattered around us, drinking beer and shamelessly flirting with you," he admitted, his gaze briefly leaving hers as he spoke from the heart.

"I guess that's what we've been doing lately, huh?"

He nodded and said, "Don't get me wrong. I've enjoyed being around you, and your boys. You've all been great for Jane. And me. Does this 'real date' make you feel more secure about what this is between us?"

She agreed, "Yes, it's nice to know there is something here away from the kids and all the horror of the last year."

Then she added with a wink, "Baby steps."

He grinned and leaned over the table to kiss her. If these were baby steps, he was all for it.

21. Chapter 21- Date part 2

Huge thanks to everyone still reading and reviewing! To the person who asked why Jane is calling Hopper "Dad" after only a month: I said in an earlier chapter that it had been a month but that is since he got the new birth certificate. She's been living with him and he's been her father figure for a year.

"Are you mad at Mike?" Jane asked Nancy. They were currently sitting on Joyce's bed, Nancy brushing Jane's hair.

"Here, hold this," Nancy said, placing a ponytail holder in Jane's open hand. Her fingers began separating one half of Jane's hair into three sections. Jane was watching her hands move quickly to braid the three sections, amazed at what the resulting hairstyle was becoming.

"I guess I'm annoyed at Mike, but don't worry. It's nothing bad. We just get on each other's nerves. All brothers and sisters do." It may get bad, she thought to herself, if Mike blabs to Mom what happened on Halloween.

"On each other's nerves?" Jane asked.

Nancy wrapped the ponytail holder at the bottom of the french braid and moved to Jane's other side. "It means we bother each other. Siblings can drive each other crazy pretty fast."

"Jonathan and Will looked like they were on each other's nerves too," Jane noted.

"Yeah, Jonathan's grounded so he's just stuck here in the house with Will a lot. It gets irritating. Most of the time they get along great. Like I said, typical brother stuff."

"If my dad and Joyce get married, will Jonathan and Will be my brothers?"

Nancy's fingers froze in Jane's hair, the question had certainly caught her off guard.

"Whoa! They are out on one date. No one is getting married."

"People who go on dates on TV get married," Jane replied.

Nancy resumed braiding and said, "Yes, though it's more complicated than that. It takes a long time for people to decide to get married."

"Complicated. Not easy. I know that word," Jane said proudly. "But if they do get married. Would Will and Jonathan be my brothers?"

Nancy sighed and explained, "They would be your step brothers, yes."

Jane nodded, taking in that information. "We would get on each other's nerves then. Brothers and sister."

Nancy laughed and said, "Yeah, you probably would. Ta da, look at your hair."

Jane turned and regarded herself in the mirror and smiled. Her usual curls were tamed into two neat french braids. "Pretty," she announced.

"Now, makeup," Nancy said, reaching for her purse again.

The three boys sat on the couch with bowls of ice cream, the game of Monopoly still set up on the floor.

"Aren't we going to finish the game?" Will asked.

"Who knows," said Mike in an annoyed tone. "Nancy took Jane for 'girl time' so how long will that be? They could be in there until your mom and the chief come home."

"What does girl time even mean?" Will asked.

Jonathan scoffed and said, "You two may as well learn now. When girls disappear like that, they're probably trashing guys. And doing stuff like painting their nails. And they're always gone forever."

"That's just great," said Mike. "I could kill Nancy. She started it when she got all bossy. But she acts like she's mad at me, then she takes my girlfriend back to your mom's room. I didn't even do anything to her."

Jonathan called Mike on his last sentence. "You did threaten to tell

about her getting drunk on Halloween, you know."

"Well, that was after she got all high and mighty," Mike said, feeling like that was justifiable cause.

"So, Jane is your girlfriend, huh?" Jonathan asked.

"Um. What?" Mike stumbled a bit over his words, realizing what he'd said. "Yeah, uh, she is. But her dad doesn't know that."

"Don't worry," Jonathan assured Mike, "He saved my ass last week. I'm not going to be the one to tell him his little girl has a boyfriend. Plus, he makes my mom happy."

"It's weird, you know?" Will said quietly. "Knowing Mom and the chief are out on a date. It's kind of gross too."

"It's not weird, Will," Jonathan attempted to explain. "Mom went out with Bob and you didn't seem to mind."

"Bob was a big nerd, and we didn't know him before. The chief has been around us a lot. And, I don't know, he's cool. And tough."

"Do you not want them going out?" Jonathan asked.

"No, it's not that," Will said, shaking his head. He knew he wasn't making himself clear. "I mean, he's great. I guess I never pictured them together before."

"We can all picture them together since we saw them making out!" Mike blurted out, immediately regretting it after seeing Will's horrified expression.

Will groaned and covered his eyes with his hands, "Don't remind me!"

Jonathan patted him sympathetically on the back, shuddering briefly. "Glad I missed that moment, brother."

"I seriously wanted to stab my eyeballs out," Will replied.

Mike attempted to lighten the mood, saying, "I thought Dustin was going to puke!"

Will burst out laughing, and Jonathan chuckled. Will added, "I thought so too!"

At that moment, the two girls came walking down the hall. Mike's jaw gaped open when he spotted Jane. Her hair looked great, and she had on just enough makeup to highlight her features. She walked over to him and looked at their empty bowls on the coffee table.

"Hey, no fair," she said, her hands on her hips. "I want ice cream!"

Mike cleared his throat, found his voice, and said, "You look really, uh, nice," as his hand reached up to touch the end of her braid. Her lips looked shiny and cheeks were rosy pink. How do girls even know how to do that, he wondered to himself. He found himself wishing for a few minutes alone with Jane though he knew that was against the rules.

"You're welcome, little brother," Nancy said with a smirk.

"Hey, Nance," Mike said quietly. "I'm not going to tell Mom about Halloween. I was just mad when I said that."

She let out a relieved sigh and threw her arms around him. "I didn't mean it when I said it wouldn't bother me if you told. I'd be dead if Mom found out!"

"You'd be dead?" Jane asked, looking very concerned.

"Not really dead," Mike explained. "Nancy just means she'd be in a lot of trouble if I told our mom. Which is why I won't tell."

"I owe you, kiddo," Nancy said gratefully. Mike thought to himself that cashing in on that could come in very handy sometime.

Jane looked at Nancy and asked expectantly, "Ice cream?"

"Sure," Nancy replied, throwing a glance at Jonathan. "If the boys didn't eat it all."

"I'm pretty much bankrupt," Mike announced, looking at his meager pile of Monopoly money. "I'll be totally bust the next time I roll."

Jane was licking her spoon after finishing her bowl of ice cream. "I'll give you some of my money!" She offered happily.

Will shook his head. "You can't do that. It's cheating."
"Not if it's a loan," Mike noted.

They heard a key in the lock and Joyce and Hopper came walking in, looking relaxed.

"Hi, Mom," said Will, not looking up from where he was counting his money.

"Dad!" Jane jumped up to hug him as if she had not seen him in days.

"That's a nice greeting, Janie," he said, returning her embrace. "I guess you've had fun, huh? I like your hair like that."

She nodded vigorously. "Nancy did it, and make up too! And I learned how to play Monopoly and had ice cream."

Hopper thought this look suited his daughter much more than the makeover she'd received at the hands of her 'sister' in Chicago.

Nancy had gotten up and was gathering the dirty dishes from the floor and coffee table. "Sorry, Mrs. Byers," she apologized. "We should have already had this cleaned up." Jonathan rose to help.

"Thank you, Nancy," Joyce said kindly. "It looks like everything went well tonight."

"It did!" Jane commented. "Mike and Nancy got on each other's nerves. Jonathan and Will too. I didn't because I don't have a brother or sister."

Jane continued, "That's when we had girl time."

Joyce looked at Hopper, trying not to laugh. "My boys got on each other's nerves? Shocking," she said with a chuckle.

Jane nodded and added matter of factly, "They did. And if you and my dad get married, they would get on my nerves too. They'd be my brothers."

Hopper coughed loudly and couldn't catch his breath. Joyce immediately stammered, "Uh, honey, that is not happening. We are nowhere near that."

"I know," Jane agreed, her eyes focusing on her dad, whose face was turning red.

"Dad, okay?" She asked, placing her hand on his back.

He coughed one last time and cleared his throat. "I'm okay," he answered, his eyes still watering but not meeting hers. "Time to go," he announced, eager to escape any marriage talk. This kid, he thought. I love her but she has to learn not to say everything that pops into her head. One date and she's practically got me and Joyce engaged.

"Have to? Not done with the game," Jane whined, a yawn escaping.

"It's late. Tell everyone bye," Hopper said, reaching for Jane's coat.

"Hop, don't forget to tell them about next Saturday," Joyce reminded him.

"Okay, kids," the chief said, taking a deep breath, "We've talked before about having Jane's friends help her get ready for school in the fall. Well that's going to be a weekly Saturday morning thing, starting a week from tomorrow."

Mike and Jane both grinned unashamedly. Hopper sighed and clarified, "This isn't fun and games time. It's going to be like school, got it?"

"Yes, sir," Mike replied, still smiling.

"School. Got it," said Jane seriously, though her face matched Mike's beaming expression. She turned to say bye to everyone, knowing she would see Mike in a week making it much easier to leave.

"See you Saturday," Mike said.

"Saturday for school!" Jane answered excitedly.

Hopper was at the door, speaking quietly to Joyce as he opened it. He

gave her a quick peck on the cheek and motioned for Jane to come.
"Let's go, honey."

In his truck, Jane yawned again, putting her hand over her mouth.

"Worn out, huh, kid?"

"No," she disagreed, her heavy eyes betraying her words. "Could have stayed longer. Finished the game."

"Sure you could've," he humored her.

"Dad?" she asked in a sleepy voice.

"Yes?"

"Did you and Joyce kiss again on your date?"

He found himself trying to think of how to kindly explain to her that just because something came into her head, it didn't have to come out of her mouth.

22. Chapter 22- Jane

Longest chapter yet right here! What can I say, I'm a sucker for some Hopper family fluff. I really love this one. I hope you do too! I took a bit of liberty with canon, since we know nothing of Hopper's family, except that the cabin was his grandfather's.

"Dad?" she asked in a sleepy voice.

"Yes?"

"Did you and Joyce kiss again on your date?"

He was trying to think of how to kindly explain to her that just because something came into her head, it didn't have to come out of her mouth. He sighed and rubbed a hand through his hair. He also realized there was a bigger issue here, an issue of privacy and boundaries. Most teenagers would be far too mortified to inquire about their parents' romances. Of course, he knew his daughter was not like most teenagers. And he wouldn't change her. Maybe just add a bit of a filter to her questions. If he was going to keep dating Joyce, now was the time to try and explain the concept of privacy to her.

She was apparently growing impatient with the silence and despite her tiredness, she asked again, "Did you?"

"Honey, that's private. It's not something you ask someone. Especially not your dad."

"Why not? Is it a secret?" Oh boy, he thought, how in the world do I explain this.

"Some topics are personal, private. Things like kissing," and he felt himself blush, though he thought he had come up with a good, succinct explanation. Point to me.

She pondered his words and said thoughtfully, "Is that why everyone acted weird when we saw you kissing? On Christmas Eve?"

"Yes, that is not something you do in front of other people. I told you that that night."

She nodded. "Jonathan said he was glad he wasn't there."

Hopper chuckled. I bet he is, he thought.

"Yeah, kids don't want to see their parents kissing. It makes them uncomfortable."

"I'll tell you other things about our date, how's that? Want to know where we went and what we did?" He knew she was just curious so he figured telling her some information would appease her enough to leave out the private details.

She perked up and said enthusiastically, "Yes! That's a compromise. No talk about kissing."

He proceeded to tell her where they had been, what they had eaten, and about dancing. He didn't mention that the dancing had necessarily been at a bar.

He smiled when she giggled around a yawn, "You danced?"

"Your dad is quite the dancer, thank you very much," he replied, a laugh escaping from his own mouth. He knew that wasn't true but she was enjoying the conversation and that was good enough for him.

They pulled in front of the cabin and he paused before turning off the truck. His eyes were still looking straight ahead but he reached to his side, touching her arm to get her attention and asked, "You like Joyce, right?"

Jane didn't know why he was asking that but she looked at him and answered, "Yes! I like her a lot." Jane thought that Joyce was sweet and caring and a good cook.

"So, if she and I start spending more time together, you'd be okay with that? I want to be sure it won't bother you."

"Okay with that," she replied. She thought they already saw Joyce a lot and she was fine with it. She really wanted to ask her dad if Joyce was his girlfriend now, but she stopped herself. That was probably a private thing, like kissing. She recalled Mike telling her not to tell her dad about being his girlfriend.

He turned off the truck and patted her leg, "Good, honey. Time to go in. It's way past your usual bedtime."

The next morning found Hopper and Jane sleeping in, then enjoying a lazy breakfast. When the dishes were done, Hopper reminded Jane to clean Snowball's litter box. She stifled an eye roll, determined to be on her best behavior. She was already counting the days until the next Saturday, when Mike and their friends would come over for her first school lesson. Vowing not to do anything to jeopardize that visit, she wrinkled her nose but tended to the litter box without complaint.

"Good job," he complimented her and she beamed with pride. "Come sit by me a minute," he said, patting the couch next to him. Jane sat down and leaned into his shoulder, waiting.

"I need to tell you something," he announced, after taking a deep breath. She immediately sat up and regarded him intensely. It sounded to her like he was about to deliver bad news.

"Whoa," he said, reacting to her change in demeanor and expression. "Do you think you're in trouble?"

"Haven't done anything!" She responded vehemently.

"I know, calm down. Nothing is wrong," he said, putting his arm around her. He felt her relax. Geeze am I so hard on her that she gets scared she's in trouble just because I want to talk? He made a mental note to speak in a more positive tone. It was probably still a holdover from her past, when she never knew what to expect from adults and was likely punished for not performing up to Brenner's expectation. He pulled her closer at the thought and reassured her, "I love you, kid."

"Love you too," she said, welcoming the comfort but not knowing where it was coming from.

"What I want to tell you is that we are having a special visitor today."

"Mike?" She sat up again, visibly excited.

Oh good grief, he thought. She's obsessed with that boy. "No, not Mike," he said with a sigh.

"Then who?" She asked, her curiosity piqued.

"My father, your granddad," he replied, searching her face for clues as to her reaction.

"I have a granddad?" She looked confused. She had heard Hopper on the phone with his dad a few times, but it had never occurred to her that he would be her grandfather.

"You sure do. He lives about two hours from here, in a retirement community apartment."

"What's that?" She asked. Cue the questions, he thought. He vowed to answer them all patiently. At least these weren't about kissing.

"It's a place for older people to live. He has friends there, like your friends."

"Do you have a mama?" She was fascinated with the thought of her dad having parents. It was a concept she had never thought of before.

"She died a long time ago. About 20 years ago," he said sadly. He hated to have to tell her that, especially after what had happened with her own mother.

"That's sad," she replied, looking down at her lap.

"It is. I still miss her." He wanted her to know those feelings were normal, even if it wasn't something he was keen to talk about, also letting her know it was okay for her to miss her mother, too.

"But my dad really wants to meet you," he added positively, eager for a happier topic.

"He does? What did you tell him?"

"Of course, he wants to meet his granddaughter. He knows you're 13 and that your name is Jane."

She nodded, as if confirming the information was correct. "Jane Hopper."

"That's right," he said proudly.

Jane looked nervous and asked in a shaky voice, "Does he know about P-papa?"

"Well, no. He knows you're my daughter now and that is enough for him." Hopper thought that was enough details for her and she accepted his response without any further questions. He had called his dad several weeks before, from his office so Jane wouldn't hear. He couldn't very well tell him the same story he would tell others. His dad would know Jane wasn't a relative, even a distant one. So he'd changed the story just a little, though it wasn't far from the truth. The story was that he had met Jane in the line of duty and had rescued her from an abusive situation. Once again, that was basically true. Like the Wheelers, his father knew Jane was behind other kids her age because of her background. His dad had been thrilled to know he had another granddaughter, having gone through the loss of Sara with his son. He had not asked many questions but had inquired when he could come visit. Hopper had told him after Christmas. The elder Hopper had held him to that and was planning to come that afternoon. It was a perfect day for it too, being New Years weekend. No one who happened to see the strange car would question a family visit on a holiday weekend.

"Will he like me?" Jane asked timidly.

"You bet! He's going to love you, kid. Grandparents are like parents, only better, did you know that?" She shook her head.

"Grandparents spoil you and never fuss at you," he said, grinning.

Returning the smile, she thought that sounded great. "What do I call him?" She wanted to be sure she knew before he arrived.

"Granddad, okay?"

"Granddad," she repeated, trying it out.

"One more thing. Remember, absolutely no using powers when he's here, understand?" He couldn't imagine explaining floating objects or flickering lights to his 70 year old father.

"Yes, sir. Got it. How long? Till Granddad is here?"

"A few hours still," he answered.

"Got to go get ready!" She jumped off the couch and ran into her room, Snowball close behind.

Jane sat at the kitchen table, working some Math problems her dad had written. She was so excited and anxious about their visitor, Hopper had to give her something to do. If he hadn't, she'd have driven him crazy, running to the window every five minutes looking for her grandfather and asking him one million questions. So he had written down some work for her, enticing her to complete them by telling her that his dad would love to see what she had done. She currently sat working hard, thankfully still and quiet. Her pencil was moving quickly and her bottom lip was wedged between her teeth, deep in concentration. She almost didn't hear the car approach the cabin, but then she turned and caught Hopper's eyes.

"Yeah, kid, he's here," he said kindly and she bounded out of her chair. He loved seeing her so clearly happy.

As they walked toward the door, Jane suddenly felt nervous and shy. Those butterflies were back in her stomach. She slipped her hand into his and stood behind him, craning her neck around him to watch the door. He gave her hand a comforting squeeze. "It's okay, Janie," he told her. "Don't be scared."

Hopper opened the door and Jane looked seriously at the man on the other side. He looked so much like her dad. She studied him, he had a scruffy white beard but almost no hair on his head. His belly was rounder than Hopper's and he had the same kind eyes.

"You gonna let me in, Jimmy, or leave me out here in the cold? I want to meet my granddaughter!" He had a booming voice and rosy cheeks. Jane thought he reminded her of Santa Claus.

"Come in, Dad!" Hopper replied jovially, wrapping him in a hug. Their hands clapped each other's backs. When they broke apart, the older man looked at Jane, who was still standing guardedly behind her father. "This is Jane," Hopper said, stepping aside a bit, keeping

her hand in his.

Her grandfather bent down a little, so he was eye level with her. "It's nice to meet you, young lady. I'm your granddad."

Jane felt her dad give her a slight nudge, reminding her of her manners. She gulped and said quietly around a shy smile, "Nice to meet you, Granddad."

Hopper closed the door and his dad looked around the old cabin, which had been his father's. "I can't believe how good this place looks, son. I still remember when my dad built it." Jane's eyes had settled on a pink gift bag in the older man's hand, and she wondered if it could be for her. But it wasn't her birthday and Christmas had past. Why would he have brought her a present?

"Come sit down, Dad. How about some coffee? You must be tired after your drive," Hopper said, walking toward the coffee pot on the kitchen counter.

"I'll take the coffee but I'm not tired. I'm not that old, you know. And I want to get to know Jane." She smiled at that, feeling flattered. He noticed her looking at the bag he was still holding. "I brought you a little something," he said, sitting on the couch and patting the cushion beside him.

Hopper had joined them, dragging a kitchen chair with him, so they could have the couch. He was holding a cup of coffee and handed one to his father. Jane was carefully holding the gift bag, her eyes finding her dad's, asking for silent approval. He nodded and said, "Go ahead, honey."

"I had no idea what to get, you know. My friend Shirley helped."

"Your friend Shirley, huh?" Hopper questioned, a twinkle in his eye. "Just a friend?"

"Don't sass your old man, boy," his father said, though he was still smiling. "Shirley lives down the hall from me. Her grandkids visit all the time so she had some thoughts on what Jane here might like." Hopper felt a twinge of guilt that he didn't visit his dad more and that

he was just now meeting Jane. Of course that had been for his dad's own safety. Hopper knew his father could be in danger if he had known about Jane during the year he'd kept her hidden.

Reaching into the bag, she pulled out a decorated tin. At first she thought that was the gift until she heard and felt there was something inside it. Opening the lid, she saw it was filled with homemade chocolate chip cookies. Her eyes grew wide and a big smile spread across her face. She definitely liked having a grandfather.

"Shirley made the cookies," Hopper's dad said to him. "Her grandchildren love them. There's something else in there," he added, motioning to Jane.

She tentatively reached back into the bag and pulled out a smaller tin, this one with a envelope taped to the front. Opening the envelope, her eyes got even wider and her mouth gaped open. In her hand she held a ten dollar bill and three ones. Judging by her reaction, Hopper thought it could have been a million dollars. She had never had her own money before. Jane was in total shock.

"One dollar for every birthday," her grandfather explained. Hopper sniffed a bit, feeling the room had suddenly become a little dusty. He rapidly blinked, clearing his eyes.

Jane shook the tin and hearing its contents rattle, she carefully removed the lid. The container held an assortment of candy and bubblegum, their colorful wrappers causing Jane to grin even more. Now she knew she loved having a grandfather.

"Seriously, Dad? Are you trying to rot all her teeth on your first time meeting her?" Hopper asked in a wilted tone, shaking his head. Jane was already munching on a cookie and was looking through the sweets in the candy tin, trying to decide what to have first. He gently reminded her, "What do you say, Jane?"

Her head snapped up and she blushed slightly, realizing she had forgotten in the excitement of opening the gifts. "Thank you, Granddad!" She said brightly.

"You're welcome, honey," he answered kindly. "I'm glad you like the

presents."

Hopper raised his eyebrows and replied, "Treats and money. What's not to like? Every kid's dream. You're spoiling her already."

"As it should be," his father said definitively. "That's what grandparents are for."

Hopper did understand that and it pleased him to no end to see them bonding but he wasn't going to let his daughter go crazy on the sweets. He knew from experience that since she had never had sugar in her younger years, it tended to upset her stomach when she had too much. He had learned that the hard way when he let her indulge in candy laden Eggos after Halloween. She was currently chewing a tootsie roll when he stood up and proclaimed, "Choose one more piece for now." He was already holding the cookie tin and had his hand reached out for the candy container. She grabbed a piece of bubblegum and reluctantly handed him the tin.

Hopper walked to the kitchen and put the two tins on top of the refrigerator. "You can have a little more after dinner."

"Really, Jimmy, let the girl enjoy her gifts," his father admonished.

"Ha!" Hopper found that hilarious. "Would you have let me eat my weight in candy and cookies in the middle of the afternoon when I was a kid?"

"That's different," his dad declared, winking at Jane. She was beginning to think her grandfather was her new favorite person.

"Uh, huh, I don't think so. Who's the one that will have to hear her complain of a stomach ache or pay the dentist bill when she gets a bunch of cavities?"

His dad decided to drop the subject. He scooted closer to Jane and asked her, "So, what do you like to do?"

She shrugged, suddenly feeling self conscious though she was certainly warming up to the man. Hopper felt guilty again, realizing she didn't do much because she was stuck in the cabin most of the time. He leaned down and whispered something in her ear. Her

expression brightened and she hurried into her room, returning holding the fluffy white kitten. "Granddad, this is Snowball. She keeps me company during the day." She bounded up again, leaving Snowball on the couch and calling as she went to the kitchen table, "Been working on Math, want to see?"

"I'd love to see. Your dad was always good at Math too," he answered fondly. "We practically had to tie him down to get him to do a book report, though," he added with a chuckle.

"Really?" She asked. She wasn't sure what a book report was but she knew her dad liked reading books to her. She had never really seen him read a book on his own, though. Jane realized that her grandfather could share stories about her dad growing up, a thought that captivated her. She set her Math paper on the coffee table, temporarily forgotten, and said intently, "Tell me more. Please. About my dad."

"Remember Huckleberry Finn?" He was relaxed on the couch, his feet on the coffee table, his hands threaded behind his head.

"Oh, she doesn't need to hear that story, Dad," Hopper quickly interjected, hoping for a change of subject. No such luck. His dad completely ignored him and kept on talking.

"You were just about Jane's age, wouldn't you say, Jim? Maybe a year younger." He didn't wait for a response. Which was a good thing because Hopper was rubbing his forehead nervously. He was not eager for Jane to hear about his less than stellar moments.

"What happened?" Jane was listening closely to her grandfather.

"Your dad tried to pull one over on his mom and me. He was supposed to read Huckleberry Finn and write a report on it for school. We kept asking how it was going and he would swear up and down he was working on it. I'd say, you reading Huckleberry Finn? And he'd look right at me and say yes, sir!" He was shaking his head and laughing at the memory. His son was not as amused, glaring at his father but he knew he couldn't stop him from finishing the story at this point.

"Then my wife gets a phone call from the teacher, the day the report was due. It seems our boy hadn't done it. He hadn't even read the book. Jim's mom called me at work. I was so mad, I drove to the school."

At this point, Hopper interrupted, clapping his hands together and saying, "Thanks for sharing that heartwarming family story, Dad! Now, let's think about what to have for dinner."

"I'm not done yet and you know it," his dad said.

Jane was listening with rapt attention. Hopper groaned, knowing he was outnumbered.

"What then, Granddad?"

"I drove to the school and got my boy out of his class. I marched him to the parking lot and tanned his hide right there in the front seat of my car. Then we went home and I made him sit at the kitchen table and read that book, sore backside and all."

Jane wasn't 100 percent sure what he meant but she could figure it out. She had watched enough TV and had heard her friends mention getting punished like that when they were younger, usually in the context of giving each other a hard time.

"I still cringe to this day when I see that book," Hopper said. "I think you scarred me for life." He was sitting on the end of the sofa, head back and his hands over his eyes. He didn't want to make eye contact with either his father or his daughter after the embarrassing story.

"You shouldn't have lied and you know it," his dad was cutting him no slack, even all these years later.

Jane walked over to her father and took his hands off of his eyes. She stood behind the sofa, peering down at him. "Dad," she said seriously. "Friends don't lie. Or family."

"I know, kid," he sighed. "Believe me, I learned my lesson. At least for a few months," he added, chuckling a bit.

"Turns out he was sneaking out and going fishing instead of doing

that dang report. He actually told us he'd rather go fishing than read about a kid getting to go fishing."

"Give me some credit for that particularly creative explanation," Hopper said, laughing.

"No TV, Dad?" Jane asked, connecting the story to the only consequence she herself could really relate to.

"We didn't even have a TV then, kid," Hopper replied. "We got one shortly after. But TV wasn't like it is now. There weren't very many shows on. Plus, your granddad took a more, uh, hands on approach to consequences."

"I bet you never get in trouble, do you, honey? I can't imagine you ever doing anything wrong," Jane's grandfather said to her.

"Spoken like a true grandparent," Hopper commented sarcastically. "She has her moments. But she's very good most of the time," and he left it at that.

"Granddad," Jane said, crooking her finger at him and leaning into his ear. "Don't like consequences."

"Jim! Don't tell me you punish this sweet girl."

Hopper rolled his eyes. "I don't recall you being bothered when you were busting my tail. You didn't seem anti punishment then. And the worst Jane has ever had happen is being grounded from TV for a few days. She survived, as you can see." His dad didn't need to hear about the time he threw out all the Eggos after she'd sneaked out. That was not a parenting moment he cared to remember.

"Be sure you aren't hard on her or you'll have to answer to me," his father replied.

"Yes, sir," Hopper answered, pulling Jane into a one armed hug. He knew his dad would probably think any consequences he imposed on Jane would be considered hard on her. Once again, like a true grandparent.

"Now, can we talk about dinner? I'm thinking burgers and fries, who

likes that idea?" Hopper asked.

"Me!" Jane said enthusiastically.

"Dad, why don't you ride with me, and we will bring the food back here."

"Sure, son," he responded, grabbing his coat.

"We won't be long, honey," Hopper said, ruffling her hair, getting his keys and heading toward the door.

Jane watched them both leave, dutifully locking the door behind them. She smiled, thinking having a grandfather was a pretty awesome thing and wondering if she could sneak a few pieces of candy without her dad knowing.

23. Chapter 23- Hopper

Many thanks to all who are still reading and reviewing! I hope you enjoy this one.

"And then I told him if I caught him trying to sneak a cigarette again, I'd make him smoke the whole pack in one sitting. He knew I'd do it, too," Hopper's father said, a glint in his eye showing how much he was enjoying entertaining Jane with stories of her dad as a kid. She was loving it too. The three of them sat at the table, having finished their take out dinner.

"Granddad," Jane said seriously. She had important information to tell. "Dad still smokes those."

"Yeah, I know, but I can't say anything because I do too," he answered. "He learned it from me. Don't do it, not even just one, Jane. It's a bad habit."

"Bad," Jane agreed, nodding. She didn't understand why anyone would ever start something so stinky.

"If you're going to keep walking down memory lane, how about you tell my daughter something that doesn't make me sound like a total punk," Hopper suggested. All of his dad's stories so far were about him getting in trouble. But Jane was relishing every word.

"Sure. Just let me think of something," he said. "This may take a while." And he burst out laughing. Jane followed suit, though she wasn't exactly sure what was so funny. Her granddad's laugh was infectious.

"You're impossible," Hopper said, chuckling a little in spite of himself. He started to clear the table and noticed Jane focusing on the top of the refrigerator. He quirked his eyebrow, saying, "I guess you're thinking that's dessert."

"Yes, I am thinking that!" She answered cheerfully.

Hopper got down the two tins and set them on the table. "Not too

much, hear me?"

"Yes, sir," Jane replied absentmindedly, sifting through the candy.

"Dad, I'll go get your bag out of your car. Come join me and we can indulge our bad habit on the porch."

"Is Granddad having a sleepover?" Jane asked, her mouth stuffed with chocolate chip cookie.

Hopper grimaced as cookie crumbs fell when she spoke. "First of all, do not talk with your mouth full. And yes, he's spending the night. He'll have my bed and I'll sleep on the couch. It's too late and dark for him to drive back now."

Jane clamped her mouth shut and nodded. She watched as the two men stepped outside, and she reached for a lollipop from the candy tin.

On the porch, both Hoppers lit a cigarette and exhaled at the same time. The younger man asked, "What do you think of your granddaughter?"

"She's a great kid, Jimmy. I'm really proud of you. And happy that you two found each other."

"Thanks, Dad. She's overcome a lot."

"Tell me, how bad could her background be that she didn't even ride with us to go get dinner? Is she cooped up here all the time? That's no way for a kid to live."

Hopper bristled a bit at his father's assessment.

"Her background's pretty bad. I don't like keeping her cooped up. I know it's not ideal. And it won't be this way forever. I have to keep her safe, though."

His father nodded, not fully understanding, and how could he. Hopper had no intention of endangering him by explaining details.

"She should be able to start school this fall. That's our goal."

Once again, a nod. Hopper knew the whole thing must seem crazy to his dad and he was thankful he wasn't questioning more. He changed the topic to a more pleasant one.

"She sure seems to have attached right away to her Granddad," Hopper observed.

His father grinned, his pride evident. "I admit I was a little worried. It's not often you gain a new family member who's already a teenager."

"Bribery with treats and money can't hurt," Hopper observed, clapping his dad on the back and opening the door for them to go back in.

"Not bribery, Jimmy. Just being a grandparent."

As they opened the door, Hopper saw Jane scrambling to cover the cookie and candy tins in a hurry. She looked every bit guilty. He raised one eyebrow in a questioning look. She scurried toward the bathroom, calling, "Going to take my shower, Dad! Brush my teeth too."

He went to the kitchen table and picked up the containers, noticing they each felt lighter. Uh huh, he thought as he put them back on top of the refrigerator. Got to teach that girl some moderation.

A short time later, Jane sat on the couch between her father and grandfather, reading while they watched TV. Hopper noticed her squirming uncomfortably and letting out a slightly pained sounding breath. "You okay, kid?"

She nodded, her eyes focused on her book. He had a feeling he knew what was bothering her but she obviously wasn't going to acknowledge it. He leaned close to her and said quietly, "Time for bed."

"Five more minutes?" She asked, more out of habit than really wanting to stay up later. Going to bed actually sounded like a good idea to her.

"Not tonight," he answered, shaking his head. "Bed, now. Tell

Granddad good night."

Wrapping her arms around her granddad's neck, she told him, "Good night. I'm really glad you came to visit."

"Me too, honey," he returned affectionately. "Good night."

Hopper followed her to her bedroom, ostensibly to tuck her in. His ulterior motive was making sure she wasn't about to throw up.

Jane was laying on her side in bed, her legs curled up close to her body. Hopper sat down next to her, reaching out to try and rub her stomach. She flinched.

He sighed and asked, "So, did you go crazy on the cookies and candy when I wasn't looking?"

"No," she responded unconvincingly, her eyes closed tightly. "Didn't go crazy."

"I see. So care to explain why you look like your stomach is tied in knots?"

She opened one eye and looked worried. "Is my tummy in knots?" That sounded serious to her. How do you untie it, she wondered.

"Not really in knots, no. Though I am betting it feels like it."

"Maybe," she admitted, her head halfway buried in her pillow. "Stomach hurts."

"Janie, you cannot eat too much of that stuff at one time. You've got to learn to stop after a little bit and save the rest."

"Didn't eat it all," she mumbled.

"I never said you ate it all. I can tell you had more than you should have, though."

"Maybe," again spoken quietly, her arms wrapped tightly around her midsection.

"Do you want some medicine?" He knew the answer would be no. She avoided medicine at all costs. The one time she'd had a fever, he had take Tylenol right along with her to prove to her it was safe before she would swallow it.

"No medicine, Dad. Just want to sleep."

"Do you feel like you can go to sleep?"

She nodded, "Night, Dad. Sorry I ate too much sugar and got my stomach in knots."

"No need to apologize to me. Though I wish you'd listen to me about things like this. I do know what I'm talking about."

A slight whine escaped her lips, her hand rubbing her belly. He hated seeing her hurt, even if it was of her own doing.

"Come and get me if you change your mind about that medicine. Remember I'll be sleeping on the couch. Love you."

"Love you too," came the reply.

"How are you feeling?" Hopper asked Jane the following afternoon. He had insisted she have a simple breakfast and had made her some hot tea to soothe her stomach. She only momentarily balked at the bland breakfast, knowing her body may rebel against waffles and syrup. So it had been toast and hot tea, which did taste good to her. Hopper's dad had left mid-morning, with promises to Jane to visit again soon. Jane had hugged him tightly and thanked him profusely for the presents.

"Feel okay," she answered, stroking Snowball, who was napping on her lap. Jane was curled up on one end of the couch, since Hopper had urged her to rest. He was watching football and flipping through the newspaper.

"Stomach doesn't hurt anymore?"

She shook her head. "Doesn't hurt. So, chocolate chip cookie?"

"Ha! Nice try, kid. I think you should hold off on the sugar a while

longer. I'm glad you feel better; I just don't want you to get sick. Understand?"

She nodded sadly. "New Year's Eve right? That means almost a new year." She'd heard the adults and her friends talking about it.

"Yes, it is. We are just having a quiet night at home though. We've had a lot of excitement recently, between visiting, and having people come over. Joyce may bring dinner later but besides that, we aren't really doing anything."

Jane was fine with that though the reality of being stuck in the cabin again was settling in. Her dad was right in that she'd had lots of company and trips out of the house lately. She knew he would be home tomorrow too, since it was a holiday, unless an emergency called him to work, then she faced another long week of him resuming his normal routine. Which for her meant the return of boring days alone in the cabin while he was gone. Already missing her grandfather and the excitement of Christmas visits with friends, she looked around the small house and sighed. She thought of the next Saturday, when Mike and their friends would visit for her first school lesson, a smile slipping out. At least she had that to look forward to.

She let out an exasperated breath and settled back into the couch. "Bored," she stated in an annoyed tone.

"There's plenty you can do here, though, you know. You have Christmas presents you have barely played with yet," he answered, tempted briefly to remind her to speak in more than one word sentences.

She didn't respond, looking around for something to do. She thought he was focused on the newspaper so she slyly flicked her eyes to change the TV channel. The paper went down immediately and he looked at her disapprovingly. "Hey, I was watching the game. And if you want to change the channel, ask me. Don't use that head of yours." He got up and changed the TV back.

She huffed and crossed her arms. "Bored," she said for the second time.

"Yeah, I got that. And I told you to find something to do," he reminded her, telling himself to be patient.

"Go outside?" She asked hopefully.

"You and Snowball can go on the porch."

"That's no fun," was her reply. She was getting the attitude that drove him crazy and he took a deep breath.

She's had a lot of people around lately, he told himself. He understood it was hard for her to go back to being bored and lonely.

"Want to play a game? You choose." She perked up at that and ran to pick one. Point to dad, he thought, congratulating himself.

They played two games of checkers then heard the secret knock on the door. Jane knew it had to be Joyce because she was the only other person who knew it. She jumped up excitedly and opened the door.

"Hi, Sweetie," Joyce said warmly. She was holding a bag with take out from the Chinese restaurant.

Jane looked around behind Joyce and asked, "Will?"

"Sorry, he didn't come this time. He's sleeping over at Mike's."

Jane frowned. Another time her friends were together and she wasn't. Turning on her heel, she went to her room and closed the door without another word.

"What was that about?" Joyce asked Hopper, setting the food on the kitchen counter.

"Beats me," he said. "She's been grumpy this afternoon. My dad spent the night last night, and they got along great. Maybe she's upset he left."

"And then I come in, without Will and I tell her he's at Mike's. And she's stuck here with us. Makes sense."

"I'll go talk to her in a minute. I haven't even gotten to say hello," he said, wrapping his arms around her and kissing her gently. She returned his kiss, smiling against his mouth.

"That's quite a hello, chief," she mumbled into his neck.

"I aim to please," he replied, nuzzling her hair.

"You are such a flirt. You with your tough exterior," she chuckled. "Go check on your daughter. I'll serve up dinner."

He went to Jane's door and knocked, then turned the knob to find it locked. "Uh-uh kid, no locked doors. That's a rule, isn't it." He felt the door unlock, and opening it, he saw Jane on her bed, meaning she had used her mind to unlatch the door. Shaking his head, he reminded her, "You've got to stop using your powers so much. No reason that you didn't get up to open the door. Only in life and death situations, remember?"

"Didn't feel like getting up," she announced.

He chose to let that go, figuring they could discuss her reliance on her powers another time. Right now he just wanted a pleasant evening, not an argument.

"Okay well, how about getting up to come eat?"

A shrug was her only response. Not acceptable, he thought.

Taking her hand to guide her off the bed, he encouraged her by saying, "Come on. Tell Joyce about Granddad's visit over Chinese food."

"And thirteen dollars too! Real money! Not like in Monopoly," Jane was excitedly telling Joyce as they finished dinner.

"Wow! You're practically rich," Joyce said affectionately. Jane nodded proudly.

"Dad?" Jane asked tentatively. "Dessert? Just one?"

"I guess one cookie wouldn't hurt," he answered, handing her a cookie out of the tin, then passing the container to Joyce.

"Yum," Joyce said. "Tell your dad he's welcome to visit anytime as long as he brings these."

"Help clean up, now, Janie," Hopper said, gesturing to the dishes on the table. She scowled a bit but obeyed, carrying their plates to the sink. She watched out of the corner of her eye, her dad and Joyce, their faces close together talking and laughing. He had his arm around her shoulder. Jane felt a pit in her stomach and wondered if the cookie was too much sugar. Why else would her stomach feel funny? She remembered some bubble bath she'd gotten in her stocking and not used yet. A hot bath sounded good.

"Going to take a bath," she called over her shoulder, leaving the kitchen.

She'd stayed in the bath to the point of her fingers pruning and the bubbles threatening to take over the bathroom. After finally letting it drain, she put on her softest flannel pajamas, feeling warm and cozy. Re-entering the living room, she spied her dad and Joyce, sitting very close together on the couch. Once again he had his arm around her shoulder and they were talking quietly. Jane watched them, Joyce's hand was on her dad's chest and she was giggling in his ear. His eyes were focused solely on Joyce. Jane scowled, thinking her dad had not even seen her enter the room. Jane's hand went to her belly. It felt tight and fluttery all at the same time, sort of like having butterflies but different. Confusion filled her head, not understanding why she suddenly felt angry too. Hopper saw her hand on her stomach and he leaned forward asking her, "Does your stomach hurt again, honey?"

She nodded, making her way over to the couch. Jane sat down, wedging herself between him and Joyce. Joyce whispered a question in Hopper's ear.

"Oh, no, uh, it's not that," came his awkward reply. "Not for another couple of weeks." Joyce nodded in understanding and instinctively reached up to feel the girl's forehead, but she ducked out of the way, giving Joyce a hard glare in the process.

Hopper admonished, "Hey that's not nice. She is just trying to help too."

"Don't feel hot," Jane replied, turning back toward her dad. "Need you," she clarified.

"I'm right here." He had no idea why she was so clingy all of a sudden. Maybe she really was getting sick.

"Hop, I think I'll head home. You need to take care of Jane. I didn't want to be out late tonight anyway."

"Yes," Jane agreed. "You need to take care of me. Joyce going home."

He frowned at her, saying, "Now you're being rude. What is going on?"

"Nothing. Just don't feel good."

Joyce was gathering her coat and purse. "Happy New Year, you two. I hope you feel better, Sweetie," she said to Jane, who didn't acknowledge her words. Hopper stood up to walk Joyce out, but Jane kept a tight grip on him. "Taking care of me, remember?"

"For goodness sake, I'll be right back. I'm just saying bye to Joyce." He removed Jane's hand from his own and went to open the front door, Joyce following him outside.

After closing the door behind them, he looked at her apologetically and said, "I guess Jane really doesn't feel well. Though I'm not happy with how she treated you just now. I don't know what's going on with her."

"Hmm, I have an idea," Joyce responded, putting her arms around his waist and planting a quick kiss on his lips. "It's called the green eyed monster."

He was holding her close, resting his chin on top of her head and said, "What? What is she jealous of?"

"Of us, silly. She wants her dad all to herself. Quite understandable."

He looked down at her, she raised her head to meet his gaze. "But I even asked her if it was okay that we were seeing each other. She was all for it."

"It's one thing to be all for it in theory. Or when it means she gets to hang out at my house with her friends when we go out. It's another matter altogether when I interrupt her time with you."

Hopper had not thought of any of that. "I knew you were a smart woman," he said, kissing her. She returned the affection and then broke apart, saying, "You'd better get back in there to her. She needs you right now."

"What if I need something else..." he muttered, kissing her neck.

"Stop it," she said playfully. "Call me tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied giving her one last kiss and walking her to her car. He opened her car door, said goodbye, then turned to go back inside.

Walking into the cabin, he saw Jane sitting cross legged on the floor, happily playing with Snowball. "Feeling better?" He asked, a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

"A little," came her reply, her focus still on the kitten.

"You seem to be okay," he noted, busying himself with picking up the living room.

No response but a shrug. Okay, time to talk. "Come here please," he said, taking her hand and helping her up. She reluctantly obeyed, dragging her feet toward the couch. He sat down and she followed suit, leaning against him.

"Friends don't lie," he reminded her. "Family either. So, were you really not feeling well tonight?"

24. Chapter 24- Jane

If you are still reading, huge thanks! This story will wrap up in the next couple of chapters. More family fluff in this one! Please review :)

"Friends don't lie," he reminded her. "Family either. So, were you really not feeling well tonight?"

"Not lying! My tummy hurt," she insisted, snuggling against him.

"Okay, I believe you. But was it the same kind of hurt as last night?"

She shook her head. "Felt different. And needed you."

"I was right here. But you were rude to Joyce. She was concerned about you too." Jane buried her head in his shoulder and didn't say anything.

"Hey," he said, reaching down to get her attention so she would look at him. "Why were you not talking to Joyce?"

"Told you," she mumbled, "Didn't feel good."

"We've talked about respect, haven't we?"

She nodded, her eyes on her lap. "Am respectful."

"Not to Joyce a little while ago. Rude is not respectful, kid. Let me ask you, do you know what jealous means?"

Her brow furrowed in concentration, considering the word. She knew she had heard it, probably on TV. But she couldn't say what it actually meant. "Not sure," she said.

"It means wanting something that someone else has. If I wished I had a new car like someone I know, and I looked at that car and felt angry, I would be jealous. I may even feel so jealous that I gave myself a stomach ache," he attempted to explain.

"Don't want a car. Can't even drive," she retorted.

"No, but lots of things can make people feel jealous. I think you may have been jealous of Joyce tonight. What do you think?"

She shrugged her shoulders, avoiding eye contact with him.

"I get it," he continued gently. "Tonight you wanted me to yourself. And when you saw me and Joyce, you got jealous. Feeling jealous gives you a bad feeling in your stomach. Sound like I'm on the right track?"

"Don't know," accompanied by another shrug.

"Look at me, please," he said, ducking his head to meet her eyes. "You know you're my girl, right?" A sniffle and a nod were the response. "And I will always be here for you. That's why I asked if you were okay with me and Joyce seeing each other more."

"Okay with that, honest. Not lying."

"So you need to understand that means we will sometimes spend time together. You like spending time with Mike, don't you?" It practically killed him to make the analogy but he knew it would help her understand.

"He's my favorite!" She said, perking up at the mention of his name.

"More favorite than me?" He asked.

She chewed on her bottom lip, thinking hard about that. "Love you. You're my dad. Mike is, is..." her voice trailed off. Mike had told her not to say he was her boyfriend. She didn't want Hopper to get mad at her so she left it at that.

He took in a deep breath, figuring he knew where she'd been going and thankful she stopped herself.

"You're my daughter. Nothing is ever going to change that. Sometimes I am going to be with Joyce though. And I don't want you getting upset when that happens. Being with her doesn't mean I love you any less, okay? Just like you wanting to see Mike doesn't change the way you feel about me."

Her head was in his chest now, nodding up and down against him.

"Use words and talk to me, kid."

She gulped and looked up at him. "Sorry I was jealous. Didn't like you and Joyce laughing. And whispering." She realized it had reminded her of when she had seen Mike and Max in the school gym. "Made my tummy feel funny. And mad."

"Yeah, kid, that's jealousy."

"In trouble?" She asked in an unsure voice. "Consequences?" She knew she had been rude and was worried now he may take away her school lesson with Mike and her friends the next Saturday. She would rather lose TV for a whole lot of days than have that happen.

"Naw, this isn't as bad as all that. But I do expect you to apologize to Joyce the next time you see her. She loves you, you know, and you weren't very nice to her tonight, were you?"

Jane let out a sigh of relief that she wasn't in trouble.

"Were you?" He asked again, reminding her she hadn't answered his question.

"No, Dad," she shook her head sadly, her voice quiet. "Wasn't nice. 'M sorry!" Her voice hitched a little, choking back a stray tear.

"Okay, kid, it's bedtime," he announced, giving her a hug.

"Read?" She asked, a yawn escaping her mouth.

"Hmm, I didn't quite understand that. Try again," he said with a wink.

She huffed a bit, but cleared her throat and clarified, "Will you read to me?" And added as an afterthought, "Please."

"Much better. And yes, I will be in there in a minute."

Much later that night, Jane woke up and found herself unable to fall back asleep. She padded into the kitchen to get some water and

spotting the TV, she thought of visiting Mike. It wasn't something she'd done much recently since she could now see him in person. But she couldn't sleep and she told herself that seeing him would help. She didn't even need to look and see if her dad was asleep, his loud snoring was reverberating throughout the cabin. She slowly and carefully wheeled the TV into her room and closed her door. I'll return it before my dad even knows, she thought. He had never told her specifically not to visit Mike in this way, but he was trying to get her to use her powers less. And this was definitely not a life and death situation.

Turning on the TV to static and wrapping the blindfold around her eyes, she breathed deeply and searched with her mind for Mike. There he was, in his basement. She felt her heart lighten at seeing him. "Mike," she whispered into the void. He was in a sleeping bag on the floor, Will next to him. Mike's eyes briefly fluttered open, and he turned his head. What had he just felt? Or heard? She said his name again softly. He sat up and looked confused at Will, who was sound asleep. He could swear someone was saying his name.

He knew it was crazy, though he found himself whispering back, "El?"

She was stunned but found her voice again and said quietly, "Happy New Year, Mike."

"Happy New Year, El," he responded, succumbing again to sleep, thinking that had been a very realistic, and very pleasant, dream.

25. Chapter 25- Hopper

Many thanks to everyone who is still reading! I love seeing all of your reviews.

Mornings were for coffee and contemplation, according to Jim Hopper. Currently he stood by the coffee pot in his kitchen, contemplating how to approach the issue of this particular morning with his daughter. His teenage, telekinetic daughter, he thought to himself. As if raising a teenager didn't come with enough challenges, his unique situation presented problems other fathers could not even imagine. How many other parents would wake up to see the family TV had been relocated into their child's bedroom, but not for the purpose of sneaking in a late night show. No, for his daughter, this meant she had been visiting someone in her mind, and he was one hundred percent sure he knew exactly who that had been. During the previous year, when he'd kept her secluded and hidden from everyone, he had grown to accept these "visits," and he chose not to push the issue then. He'd felt guilty enough at keeping her isolated and he couldn't deny her the freedom of seeing the Wheeler kid in her mind.

But now, he was trying to get her ready to enter society, which included discouraging reliance on her powers. He couldn't have her going to school levitating objects and spying on people in her head. On the other hand, when they were at home, could he act like she did not have these special talents at all, pretend they didn't exist? No, that wasn't feasible either. He sighed and poured his coffee, thinking these were definitely not issues other parents faced.

The sound of soft feet on the hard floor, followed by a quiet purr, had him turning around to see his daughter appear from her room, Snowball at her heels. He must have looked at her expectantly, because she turned around and retreated again to her room. She emerged a moment later, wheeling the TV out. The guilty look on her face told him she thought she had done something she shouldn't have. Wordlessly, she made her way to the freezer, retrieving the box of Eggos.

Coffee cup in his hands, her dad sat at the table and asked casually,

"Watch some TV late last night?"

"Not really," was Jane's reply from her stance by the toaster. So she isn't even going to try and act like she had the TV for actual viewing, he realized. That was a positive step for her. Baby steps.

"I guess you were visiting Mike," he said, his tone remaining almost nonchalant. Stay calm, he told himself.

Her head snapped around, as if she were just then realizing he knew exactly what she had been doing.

"Are you mad?" She asked nervously, her fingers drumming on the counter, her bottom lip between her teeth.

"Should I be?" He responded. Her brow furrowed in confusion, she did not quite know what to think about him answering her question with a question of his own. Contemplation, he thought again, though this time it was his daughter who was thinking.

"Don't want you to be," she finally said, still sounding anxious, after a few moments of silence.

"Your waffles are ready," he pointed out, gesturing toward the toaster. She turned back around and quickly removed her breakfast before it burned. Seeing how jumpy she was, he added, "Come sit down and eat, kid, and don't look so scared. I'm not angry."

Jane let out a breath, looking obviously relieved. Hopper got up to pour her some milk while she settled down in her chair.

"I do want to talk about this though," he noted. She stiffened a bit, looking on edge again. "Why did you think I'd be upset with you? And don't answer that with food in your mouth," he said, seeing the huge bite she'd just taken.

She nodded and swallowed then answered quietly, "Just thought you would be."

"Keep going..."

She took a deep breath and a long sip of milk. If he wasn't mad, she

didn't want to give him reason to get that way. "You don't like powers. That's powers."

He sighed and got up to pour another coffee, giving himself time to think about how best to respond.

"It's not that I don't 'like' your powers, Janie. I just don't want you using them all the time. It doesn't need to be a habit. Does that make sense?"

"Maybe," she answered, trying to understand.

"I think it surprised me this morning, that's all. Was something wrong? Were you sad or scared about something and that's why you wanted to visit Mike?"

"Not sad or scared. Couldn't sleep," she shrugged.

"Here's the thing. I know I've told you that using your powers needs to be only for life and death situations, right?"

"Yes, sir," she replied anxiously, chewing on her fingernail, worried he may actually be mad, despite telling her he wasn't.

"You're not in trouble," he assured her. "How's this for a compromise. It's okay if you need to visit him that way sometimes."

She brightened up, leaning forward to clarify, "It is?"

"Sure. It's not the same as using your powers in front of other people. That's where the life and death rule comes in. And here's the compromise part. Are you listening?"

"Listening!" She answered enthusiastically.

"I want you to ask me, or let me know. And I promise to say it's okay. I'll always say yes, unless there's a reason not to, for safety."

"Why would it not be safe?" She asked, her face serious in concentration. Of course she has to question it, he thought to himself.

"I'm really not sure. I guess I am reserving the right to say no if I

think there's anyway someone could know. Though honestly I cannot imagine how they would." He figured he should cover his bases and retain veto power. "I don't want secrets between us, kid. I don't want you to feel like you have to sneak around or hide stuff from me."

"What if you're asleep?"

He thought for a minute before saying, "Wake me up enough to ask. I just want to know, okay?"

"Okay, Dad! That's a compromise!" She agreed happily.

"And don't make it an every night thing, either. We are working on getting you ready for school and to be out in the real world, remember. Spending too much time seeing people in that head of yours won't help you get ready for all that. No secrets," he added fondly. Her face fell and she started fidgeting again.

"Something wrong, kid?" He asked, concerned. Her body language had gone from excited to scared in a matter of a few seconds.

"Kept a secret from you," she softly revealed. "Don't want you to be mad."

Hopper drew in a breath, willing himself to stay composed. Whatever it is, he told himself, we can deal with it. Has she been sneaking out? No way, he would know. Had she seen something in her head, something dangerous? Surely she would have told him before now. Was the Wheeler kid pressuring her to do things she wasn't ready for? Not possible, they haven't been alone. His mind reeled with a hundred things she could have been keeping from him, each scenario getting worse and worse.

He steeled himself for the worst and asked her, "Will you tell me the secret now? Please?"

"Don't be mad at me, okay?" She asked cautiously, wringing her hands together and not looking him in the eye.

Oh, God, this must be really bad, he thought. He wondered if it was too early in the morning for a beer. Could he promise not to be angry before hearing her news? She probably wouldn't tell him if he didn't

offer immunity from punishment. What if it was bad enough that he would have to deliver some sort of consequence?

"Dad? Promise you won't be?" Her question broke through his inner monologue.

"I promise to listen to you and not get angry, Janie," he replied. That seemed like a diplomatic response. He mentally congratulated himself for reserving the option of imposing consequences if necessary. He hadn't promised there wouldn't be any.

"Just tell me," he encouraged her.

Jane's eyes remained focused on her feet and she inhaled slowly. Hopper leaned forward, waiting with baited breath.

"Mike is my boyfriend," she whispered. She felt her heart plummet, hoping her dad wouldn't be angry and keep them from seeing each other.

Her words had not quite registered with him. Was that really the secret?

"What was that?" It was the only thing he could think of to say. Surely there is more to it, he thought.

Jane knew she had said it quietly but she thought he could hear her. She cleared her throat, gathered her resolve, and said again, "Mike is my boyfriend."

Hopper stared at her for a few seconds then the reality of her big secret sank in and he burst out laughing. Relief flooded through him as he gave in to his hysterics, belly laughing. Jane looked puzzled, then frowned.

"Dad. Not nice to laugh at me," she informed him, folding her arms and looking at him crossly.

"I'm sorry, honey," he sputtered, wiping his eyes. "I'm not laughing at you. I'm just so relieved."

"Why?" This was certainly not the reaction she thought he would

have.

"I thought your secret may be something bad." He paused and thought for a minute. Surely they haven't 'acted' on this status of boyfriend/girlfriend. Just to be sure, he asked, "Wait, you and Mike haven't done anything since deciding you're boyfriend and girlfriend, have you? Anything you wouldn't want me to know?"

"No," her head vigorously shook back and forth. She looked confused and asked "What would we have done?"

"Nothing. Never mind." If she didn't know, he certainly wasn't going to give her any ideas.

"Mike said you probably knew. That we are boyfriend and girlfriend. But that you might be mad," she said.

Here we go again with the "Mike said," Hopper thought, rolling his eyes and running his hand down his face. I may just have to remind young Mr. Wheeler about our talk on openness and honesty. He didn't like the idea of that little loverboy encouraging his daughter to keep secrets, even one as harmless as this.

"I'm not mad. No more secrets though, alright?"

"Alright," she replied, nodding earnestly and taking her dishes to the sink.

"You know what? New Year's Day is for football," he announced, heading to the couch.

"Football is boring," she muttered under her breath, but followed him anyway.

"Oh no, you didn't, young lady," he teased, taking her by the hand and sitting her down next to him. "Now you're in for it. Have a seat and get comfy. I'm going to explain this amazing sport to you."

26. Chapter 26- Mike

This chapter is a bit short but the next one is coming soon! Can you do me a favor if you're enjoying it and leave me a review? Thank you so much!

Mike usually loved the week of New Year's. It was the second week of the Christmas holiday, there was no school, he could sleep late, and hang out with his friends. But during this particular week, the days dragged by. Saturday could not come soon enough for Mike, for that was the day he would get to go see Jane. Chief Hopper had made it very clear that Saturday's visit was to be purely educational, with Mike and the rest of the party helping Jane with school work. They had spent the week discussing how to approach the task. Should they back up and introduce her to the work she would have done in lower grades? Or approach it with their own 8th grade assignments and see where the gaps were? They had decided to bring the work they had due the week after the holiday, figuring they could kill two birds with one stone. Jane could work alongside them as they completed their science projects and read some of the book they were studying in English class. Mike threw some math papers in his backpack in case they got to that. He really had no clue where she was academically. To him, she was the smartest person in the world. Sadly though, he knew having never been to school gave her a lot to catch up on. It was almost time for Jane's dad to pick him up and Mike was jumpy and nervous. He wanted this to go well so the chief would have no doubt the lessons should continue.

"Michael!" Came his mom's voice from downstairs. "Chief Hopper is here!"

Mike grabbed his backpack and ran down to the front door. "Have a good day, honey!" His mom called to him as he bolted toward the truck.

"Thanks, Mom!"

Walking to the chief's vehicle, the first thing he noticed was that the truck already looked full of people. Apparently Mike's house had been the last stop. In the front seat sat the chief and Will, the back

seat was full with Lucas, Dustin, and Max. Mike frowned a bit at seeing Max. He wasn't sure how Jane would react to that but he was once again not about to do or say anything to jeopardize these visits. Max was pretty much with the party most of the time anyway. So he opened the passenger door and scooted in next to Will, saying hi to everyone in the process.

The ride was noisy and lively, all of the kids talking over each other about what they had brought and what everyone thought they should work on first. Hopper remained quiet for the most part, internally wondering what in the world he had gotten himself into. As they approached the cabin, he told them, "Everyone don't talk at once, kids, when we get there. I don't want Jane to be overwhelmed."

Mike wanted to point out that Jane had loved having the party over (minus Max) on Christmas Eve and she hadn't seemed overwhelmed then. But he kept his mouth shut, knowing the chief was probably as nervous about the day as he was. They both wanted it to go smoothly, for Jane.

Mike grinned when he saw Jane peeking out the front window, (breaking the rules, her dad would say), eagerly watching as they piled out of the truck. Jane opened the door (another rule violation) and greeted them all excitedly. Her face fell a bit when she saw Max, after hugging Dustin and Lucas. She gave the other girl a passing, "Hi," then turned her attention to Hopper, Will, and Mike, who were bringing up the rear.

Hopper reached out and stopped Mike with a hand on his shoulder, saying, "Go on in, Will. Mike and I are going to have a quick chat." Will threw his friend a sympathetic glance and went to the door. Though he wondered what that was about, he wasn't about to question the chief. Jane gave Will a hug then turned her attention to her dad, who was leaning against his truck, Mike next to him, shuffling his feet nervously. She crossed her arms and regarded him intensely, but he merely said, "Close the door. You're letting the heat out. We will only be a minute." She toyed briefly with asking why he was talking to Mike, or insisting she come out there too, then thought better of it. With a sigh and an annoyed look at her father, she closed the door.

Mike was shifting his weight from foot to foot, wondering what in the world he had done now. He shivered in the cold and pulled his jacket tighter around himself. He had obeyed Hopper's every command, politely followed his rules, and still he found himself being stared down by the imposing father of the girl he loved. Why does everything I do turn to crap, he thought. Despite his best efforts, he felt like he was in trouble and he had no idea why. He exhaled, his breath visible, and waited for Chief Hopper to speak. Relax, Mike, he told himself, maybe he just wants to talk about Jane's lessons. Yeah, right, you wish, he thought. He could have talked about that in front of the others. Hopper had lit a cigarette and was smoking it slowly, clearly letting Mike squirm. The man is enjoying this, Mike realized, as he willed his features to stay passive. If he opened his mouth, what would come out at this moment would probably not be respectful and pissing off the chief would surely be counterproductive. So he waited.

"Jane shared something interesting with me the other day," Hopper began speaking as nonchalantly as if he were reading a grocery list. "Regarding you. Any guesses what it was?"

Mike's eyes snapped up from where they had been focused on the ground. Think, Wheeler, think, he racked his brain. What would Jane have told her dad that would make him angry? He knew he should give some kind of response so he simply shook his head in confusion.

"No?" Hopper asked, his eyebrows raised in questioning.

Mike swallowed and hoped his voice wasn't as shaky as he felt.

"No, sir," he answered as confidently as he could manage. Stay calm, he told himself. If I survived that horrific day when Hopper drove me to school and the mortifying experience of catching the man and Will's mom making out, I can handle whatever this is.

"I'll help you out. It has to do with you being my daughter's boyfriend. And you telling her to keep that a secret from me. Does that jog your memory?"

Mike felt his heart plummet to his stomach. Don't throw up, he told himself, briefly closing his eyes and taking a deep breath.

"I thought we had an agreement, didn't we?" Hopper fixed him with a stare.

"Yes, sir, I just uh, well," Mike stumbled over his words.

"I remember telling you that if you tried to undermine me again, I'd cut you off at the knees. So, is that what needs to happen? You're telling her to keep secrets from me. That sounds like working against me."

Mike coughed, then shivered, his breath stuck in his throat. No, no, please, he silently begged. Please don't tell me I can't see her. I'm such an idiot, he thought to himself. I should have never told her not to tell her dad.

"Chief," he spoke quickly. "I'm really sorry. I only told her that because I was scared you'd be mad if she told you. It was dumb, I know. I promise I'll never tell her to keep anything from you again."

Hopper nodded and extinguished his cigarette, considering the boy's words. He was going to give the kid a break. But not just yet.

"You two haven't 'done' anything you wouldn't want me knowing, have you?"

Mike's eyes grew wide and his eyebrows shot up, as he hurried to answer with no room for doubt. "No, sir! Nothing! When would we even have done anything? You have to believe me. We barely see each other!" His voice cracked at the end.

Hopper scoffed a little, thinking the two of them saw each other a lot more than he had originally planned.

"I mean, even if we did see each other more, we wouldn't do anything!" Of course, Mike hoped they would in the future, not that he was sharing that information now.

"Okay, calm down and breathe, kid. I believe you. Just remember our deal. This is your one free pass. Don't make me regret it. No more telling her to keep things from me. Got it?"

Mike was so relieved, he leaned forward, his hands on his knees,

breathing in deeply.

"Yes, sir, I got it," Mike replied, then added, "Thank you."

At that moment, the door flew open. An angry Jane stood with her hands on her hips and called, "Dad! Please bring Mike in."

"We're coming, honey," he answered amiably, clapping Mike on the shoulder and leading him inside.

Jane was waiting to envelop Mike in a big hug, which he returned, his eyes darting to Hopper. Keep that healthy fear, kid, and we will be just fine, Hopper thought.

27. Chapter 27 - Jane

The other kids were already spread out across the cabin, books and papers unpacked, and a poster board for Max and Lucas's science project laying on the coffee table.

"I'll just be over here," Hopper told them, sitting at the kitchen table with some files. No one was quite sure where to start so Mike asked Jane.

"Science," she replied. Hopper chuckled, not surprised. That seemed to be her favorite subject (which Hopper attributed to one young Mr. Wheeler, who was a certified science nerd) and the one she understood most easily. He preferred to think her understanding of science was owing more to her infatuation with Mike than the fact that she was raised as a living science experiment, though he knew rationally that was part of it too. He cleared his throat to get her attention, looking at her with expectation. She knew he was quietly correcting her one word answer.

"Let's start with science," she corrected herself, then looked at him and raised her eyebrows as if to say, "Happy now?" He gave her an approving nod and opened his first file.

"Science it is then," Mike declared. No one was shocked to see him take the lead when it came to Jane's lessons. Another silent and approving nod came from the chief and Mike felt his confidence soar. "El, I mean Jane, why don't you go over the chapter on the periodic table with Dustin while Lucas and Max start their poster? It's on hydrogen. Will and I are going to work on our talk on helium."

"Hey," said Dustin eagerly, "Maybe you could take in some helium balloons and suck on them before your talk? You'd sound like a cartoon!"

"Not a good idea," Came Hopper's voice. "Don't put it in Jane's head that it's fun to be inhaling potentially dangerous gas."

"Killjoy," Dustin muttered under his breath.

"Heard that, Henderson," Hopper remarked, underlining something in the case file he was reading and not looking up.

Dustin mouthed to his friends, "How does he do that?"

Jane did not know what any of that meant so she merely shrugged and sat on the floor next to Lucas and Max's poster. Max handed her the science textbook and opened it to the right page.

Jane's eyes grew wide as she viewed the long words written in small print. This was nothing like the books she usually read. Mike sensed her hesitation and sat down next to her.

"Do you know what the periodic table is?" he asked kindly. She shook her head, her eyes staring at the strange combinations of letters he was showing her. They weren't even words, she thought to herself.

"It's a chart of the all of the elements. It's really cool. They are arranged by their atomic number. Don't worry about that part, I'll go over it more later, okay?" She nodded, running her finger under the letters on the table.

"You know what?" Mike continued, "Everything in the world is made up of elements. So once you understand this, you can do all sorts of neat chemistry and really see what stuff is made up of." She smiled, looking alternatively at the book and back to Mike. He had a remarkable way of explaining things to her without making her focus on what she didn't know. When he described even difficult concepts, she only wanted to learn more but never felt dumb.

"Will and I are giving a presentation on helium. It's right here, see?" He pointed to a spot on the periodic table.

"It goes in balloons?" Jane asked.

"Yes but your dad's right. We won't bring balloons into science class."

"I bet Mr. Clarke would praise your creativity. Curiosity voyage, you know," Dustin interjected.

Hopper coughed from his place at the kitchen table. Dustin cut his eyes in that direction and dropped the subject.

They spent the next 30 minutes or so working alongside each other, Will and Mike practicing their speech and timing it to get it just right, Lucas and Max sketching out their poster. Dustin was showing Jane various pieces of information in the science textbook, and she was paying close attention, trying to take it all in. Max gently interrupted, reaching for the book when she and Lucas got stuck on part of the poster. "Let me see this just a minute, then I'll give it right back. Stalker here thinks he knows all about hydrogen already but I think we should consult the book," she said, elbowing Lucas in the ribs and laughing.

"Keep it," said Jane, frowning slightly in Max's direction and standing up. The boys exchanged nervous glances, the tension between Jane and Max evident. Mike knew this would be an issue but he wished the two girls would just talk it out and move on. Jane tolerated Max's presence in their group, but that was the best he could say about it. Lucas's eyes darted between them, clearly feeling pulled in the middle. This can't go on, thought Mike, if these weekly lessons were to be successful. The part of him that was protective of Jane wanted to tell Max not to come with them anymore but realistically he knew that wasn't fair to Max. He still felt bad about how he'd treated her when she'd first come to Hawkins, and now she was only being kind to Jane. He had no right to tell her to get lost. Not to mention that she was Lucas's girlfriend, so her place in the party was pretty much confirmed.

Jane had walked over to where Mike and Will sat on the couch, leaning over the back of it to look at their presentation notes. Mike got up, lead her toward the door for a little privacy and said to her quietly, "Hey, do you think you could try to be nicer to Max? She's kind of in the party now."

Jane crossed her arms and looked toward the window, not making eye contact with him. You're supposed to be on my side, she thought.

"Maybe you two should go talk? Clear the air."

"The air?" She asked. The air seemed fine to her.

"It means talk about stuff that you're upset about. So, will you just try? For me?"

She gave him a soft smile and a reluctant nod. She couldn't say no to that, as much as she wanted to.

"Want me to come with you?"

"No," she replied, though she thought it was sweet of him to offer. "Girl time."

"Your room is cool, Jane," Max said, still trying to get the other girl to open up to her. Max sat on the bed, Snowball next to her. Jane eyed them both, noticing Snowball liked Max. "And your cat is nice, too." It was a feeble attempt at compliments, not usually Max's strong suit. But she did want to at least come to an understanding with Jane, so she was being as friendly as she possibly could.

"Can I ask you something?" Max asked Jane, her gaze focused on Snowball.

Jane nodded, which Max saw out of the corner of her eye.

"Why don't you like me?" Max was generally a blunt and straightforward person and she saw no reason not to get right to the cause of why they were there.

Jane took in a deep breath. "Saw you and Mike once. At school. Laughing, talking. Think I was jealous. Just learned what that means."

Max's brow tensed in concentration, then the realization of when Jane had seen them hit her.

"Oh, gosh," she hurriedly began to explain, "Mike couldn't stand me! He thought I was trying to take your place in the party. That day, it was nothing. I was just goofing around on my skateboard, then I fell like an idiot, but there was nothing for you to be jealous of. All he cared about was you."

"Really?" Jane asked, finally looking at Max for the first time.

"Really," Max nodded definitively. "I think he only lets me in the party now because you're back and he's so much happier. That and because Lucas and I are, uh, you know..."

"Lucas is your boyfriend," Jane stated matter of factly.

Max's cheeks flushed deep pink. "Yeah, he is."

"Mike is my boyfriend," Jane added.

"That's great, Jane. I'm happy for you!" Max was relaxing, grateful she and Jane were having an actual friendly conversation.

"Max," Jane's eyes were focused on her feet, she was clearly embarrassed. "Sorry you fell that day. I...shouldn't have done that..." Jane said sheepishly.

"Huh? I don't get it..." Max didn't know why Jane would be apologizing then it dawned on her what she meant.

"That was you?" Max's jaw dropped open.

Jane gave a slight nod and said, "Sorry. Was jealous. And mad."

"Oh, well, that's okay. It was a long time ago. I can't imagine how hard it was for you to be kept away from everyone for so long."

"Thanks," Jane mumbled.

"So, can we be friends now? I mean, we need to stick together. We're the only two girls in this party! Someone has to keep those four nerds in line and I can't do it all by myself," Max said, a big grin spreading across her face.

Jane smiled back, nodding vigorously and said, "Friends. Promise."

"I'm glad," Max said, rising from the bed and extending her hand.

Jane shook it, and then in an unexpected move, she pulled Max into a hug.

"Glad too," Jane said, before adding, "Do you know how to braid?"

In the living room, the boys were taking a study break and were anxiously wondering just what was happening in Jane's room.

"I don't hear any yelling," Mike said, pressing his ear to Jane's closed

door.

"The lights aren't flickering, so that's a good sign," Lucas noted. He was standing with Mike, both of them clearly hoping the girls were reaching a truce. Suddenly the door opened, Mike and Lucas jumped back and tried to look casual. They weren't successful.

"Eavesdropping, Stalker?" Max said, smacking Lucas's arm.

"Just looking out for you, Red," Lucas responded, flashing a toothy smile. "She could throw you across the room, you know."

"Jane wouldn't do that. We're friends," Max said, giving the other girl a wink.

Lucas had reached out and was twirling the end of Max's french braid. "This is new," he commented.

"It was girl time bonding," Max explained. "Don't get used to it," she added. She much preferred her hair down.

Jane wore a matching hairstyle and a happy expression. "Friends now," she announced, to the relief of the boys. Hearing the secret knock, Jane's attention was drawn to the front door as she watched her dad go to open it. Who could that be, she wondered.

Hopper opened the door and Joyce came in, saying, "Who's ready for some lunch?"

28. Chapter 28- Jane

Sorry it took me a while to get this one posted! It's amazing what one unkind review can do to one's confidence. It was a guest review too so I couldn't even respond. She said this story was terrible, etc., but I'm telling myself to focus on the 100+ positive reviews, and reminding myself that I am having fun writing it! Anyway, I meant for this to be the penultimate chapter but I don't want to end on an odd number (weird, I know) so there will be two more. Thanks to everyone still reading!

"Joyce, you didn't have to do that," Hopper said, taking grocery bags out of her hands and giving her cheek a quick peck. "I would have fed them."

"You have six teenagers here, Hop. They can eat a lot, believe me."

Hopper beckoned Jane to the kitchen, saying, "Come help us get lunch ready, please." She had a feeling she knew why he really called her over. Jane found herself feeling nervous and uncomfortable. He had told her she owed Joyce an apology the next time they saw her. Hopper leaned down and whispered in her ear, "Remember you have something to say to Joyce?"

"Later?" She asked, hopefully deflecting the topic. "Want to do more school."

"You will. But first you're going to apologize," he replied, and Jane knew he wasn't going to let her get away with putting it off. She gave her dad a silent pleading look and his response was a firm shake of his head.

She sighed and looked shyly at Joyce. "M sorry. Sorry I wasn't nice on New Year's Eve."

Joyce gave her a hug and told her, "Thank you, sweetie," she said, rubbing her back. "I never want to get in the way of your time with your dad, I promise, okay?"

"Okay," Jane nodded, returning the warm embrace. She really did love Joyce. "Dad says I got jealous and it put my tummy in knots."

"Everyone feels that way sometimes. It's alright," she reassured Jane.

"Hey, Mom, can we eat?" Will asked, making his way to the kitchen, the rest of the party close behind.

"You bet," she answered. "Lunch is served." Hopper and Joyce had just finished laying out lunch meat, cheese, bread, chips, and fruit.

"Thanks Mrs. Byers, this looks great," said Lucas, piling his sandwich high.

"Hey, I helped!" Hopper said in mock indignation. Dustin clapped him on the back and retorted, "Well done, Chief, Sir!" Hopper eyed him suspiciously.

"So, is the school work going well?" Joyce asked after everyone was seated and eating.

"Really good!" Jane answered excitedly. "Learned about science. It's a really big book. And me and Max had girl time." Hopper was glad to hear her positive take on the morning. He was afraid she would get intimidated by how much she had to learn. "Proud of you, kid," he told her, putting a kiss on her head.

"Sounds like a productive morning," Joyce said fondly.

"After lunch we'll switch to English," Mike said. "And I thought maybe we could give Jane a bike lesson," he added, glancing his eyes in Hopper's direction.

"I'm not sure about that. I think it's too cold," Hopper said in a disapproving tone.

"We all have coats," Mike offered, as if Hopper didn't know that. "And we won't be out there for long, with it being her first time on the bike. Can't we just try it?" Mike was fighting hard to resist the urge to point out that Jane had lived outside, in the woods in the middle of winter before she came to be at Hopper's cabin. He highly doubted a few minutes outside to ride her brand new bike would exactly give

her frostbite.

"Please, Dad?" Jane implored, giving Hopper her best puppy dog eyes.

"I think it's okay, Hop," Joyce said, smiling at Jane.

"Jeeze, I know when I'm outnumbered," Hopper sighed. "Do some more school work and we'll see about the bike lesson."

"Oh, you're reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*?" Joyce asked, noticing Will retrieve the book from his backpack. "That's one of my favorite books."

"That's a good one, alright. Great movie too," Hopper noted.

"Better than *Huckleberry Finn*, Dad?" Jane asked, giggling, her hand over her mouth.

Hopper's eyebrows shot up, shocked and more than a little proud to see her making a joke. Wow, he thought, that's a big step. A grin spread across his face as he reached out to ruffle her hair.

"There's a movie?" Dustin practically shouted. "Why the heck are we reading the book then? Guys, let's rent the movie." Seeing the frown and stare from Hopper, he looked offended. "What? That's just smart studying, Chief."

"Read the book first, and we can all rent the movie when you're done. How does that sound?" Joyce offered.

"Compromise, Dustin. Halfway happy," Jane said, giving him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

"My idea would have been all the way happy," he scowled.

Mike and Will were sitting on the couch, the book between them. "Come sit here, Jane, and we can tell you what's happened in the book so far." She happily went and sat with them, her eyes intently focused on the novel.

Hopper was closely watching the scene in front of him. If you had

told him a year ago this is how he'd be spending a Saturday, he would have thought it was a crazy notion. Yet he was happier than he'd been in years. He chuckled at himself and felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Penny for your thoughts," Joyce said.

"You'd be overpaying," he replied with a wink. "Want to step on the porch?"

"You mean you'd trust the kids in here alone? For five whole minutes?" She asked, clearly teasing him.

"Am I that overprotective?" He asked, running his hand over his forehead.

"Hmm, no comment. Come on, Chief, let's get some air," she answered, getting her coat and taking his hand. When they were on the porch, he lit them each a cigarette and put his arm around her shoulder, kissing her briefly.

"So, tell me, do you think I hover too much?" He asked her honestly.

"I think you are a concerned father," came her diplomatic reply. Her hand intertwined with his as she looked up into his eyes.

"I'll take that as a yes, I hover too much."

"Nope, that's not what I said. You are understandably worried about your daughter, so don't beat yourself up. I could be the same way with Will. I'm tempted every day to not let him out of my sight."

"How do you do it?" He asked her honestly. "How do I know when I'm being too protective?"

Joyce wrapped her arms around his waist and placed a kiss on his lips. "All we can do as parents is do our best. Pretty crummy advice, huh? That's all I got. Trust your instincts. And trust your kid, too. She's not stupid."

"You're a smart woman, you know that?" He leaned down and kissed her, then pulled away, remembering there were six teenagers inside

that could surprise them at any minute. He rested his forehead against hers, breathing deeply as he fought the urge to kiss her again. "We'd better go back in before I can't control myself anymore."

"I drive you that crazy, do I?" She asked, batting her eyes at him.

"Jesus, you're about to make me start something here on my front porch that I really shouldn't. With our kids and their friends just on the other side of that door," he admitted, nearly breathless.

"Who knew you'd be the responsible one in this?" She teased, reaching to open the door.

"It's taking everything in me," he grumbled.

"How is the book?" Joyce asked the teenagers as she and Hopper entered the cabin.

"You were right, Dad! It's a good book," Jane noted proudly. "But some people in it are not nice. Mouth breathers." Hopper noticed that Jane and Mike were holding hands on the couch, and he suppressed the instinct to comment. Trust her, he told himself.

"Doesn't have too many big words. I like that," Jane added, smiling at her dad.

"I'm proud of you working so hard, kid," Hopper told her. "If you want to practice riding your bike after this, I guess that would be okay," he relented.

"Thanks, Dad!" She replied enthusiastically. She rested her head on Mike's shoulder as he and Will took turns reading from the book, pausing along the way to summarize what was happening. She looked so happy and relaxed, Hopper couldn't even bring himself to tell her not to lean on the boy. Baby steps for me too, he found himself thinking.

29. Chapter 29- Jane

Huge thanks to everyone who is still reading and reviewing! One more chapter after this one ...

"Don't let go, okay? Mike, okay?" Jane was holding onto the bike's handlebars with a white knuckled grip, craning her neck around to be sure Mike had a firm hold on the bike.

"I'm not letting go, I promise. Trust me," he said.

She replied, "I trust you," though she was eyeing his hands on the seat, as if willing them to stay put.

He reassured her, "Friends don't lie. I'm not going to let go."

"Try to ride a little this way," Max said, standing a few feet in front of her and motioning her forward, Lucas and Will next to her.

"You can do it!" Dustin cheered. "You've done much harder shit than this!"

"Dustin, bad word!" Jane scolded.

"You ready to try?" Mike asked. She gave him a nod, then turned to face forward with a determined expression. Her feet pushed the pedals down and the bike went forward shakily, Jane's arms struggling to keep control. It was only a few seconds before she and the bike were on the ground. Mike rushed to help her up.

"Are you alright?" He asked, reaching down for her hand. She nodded, accepting his help and brushing the dirt from her jeans. This is not as easy as her friends make it look, she found herself thinking. What if I can never do it, she worried, chewing her bottom lip and regarding the bicycle intensely. She was looking forward to being able to ride with the rest of the party. Her chin lowered and she leveled her gaze, the bike standing itself up. That will show it who is in charge, she thought with satisfaction, a smirk on her face.

Mike drew in a breath and said to her quietly, "Don't get frustrated." He looked quickly toward the cabin and was relieved to see no sign

of Jane's dad. If he had been watching, he would not approve of her using her powers in that way. He'd probably find a way to make it my fault, Mike thought. He could almost hear the chief's voice in his head saying something along the lines of, "Wheeler, why'd you let my daughter fall?"

"Frustrated?" she asked with a furrowed brow.

"Getting upset when something is hard. Don't give up, okay? And try not to use your powers. Wouldn't your dad be mad?"

"Yes," she said, dropping her eyes and looking guilty. "Did he see?"

"No, I don't think so." Unless he's spying through the window, he thought, which could be a distinct possibility.

Jane reluctantly agreed to try a couple of more times and was pleased to experience a small amount of success. She managed to ride a few feet without falling, before saying pointedly to Mike, "All done with bike riding. For today."

The others came breathless from the surrounding woods, having played tag and racing each other back to the cabin. Jane noticed Lucas and Max were holding hands and she reached out for Mike's.

"I saw that last time you got going, Jane," Will complimented. "You're getting the hang of it!"

"Bike riding is complicated, not easy," Jane replied, looking relieved to be walking hand in hand with Mike back toward the cabin.

"Hey, guys, wait," Dustin said, stopping in his tracks and holding up his hand to halt his friends. "What if we walk in on the chief and Will's mom, uh, you know..."

"Ugh, don't even say that!" Will stopped, covering his eyes and groaning.

"Are they like, a couple?" Max asked.

Jane was not sure how to answer that, so she turned to Will and asked, "Are they?"

"How should I know?!" Will replied incredulously. He honestly preferred not to think of the possibility, though he liked Chief Hopper. Liking him and seeing him kissing his mother were two very different things.

"My dad and Joyce are, are...what are they?" Jane pressed on. The rest of the party knew well that she didn't let go of topics easily. At least not before she had a definitive answer.

"You call her Joyce?" Dustin looked scandalized.

"My dad said I could. Said she's like family," Jane explained, shrugging.

"Oh, they're totally a couple then. Hands down, end of story," Dustin declared. "I mean, come on. What parent says you can call another grown up by their first name unless they're getting it on?"

"Eeww!" Will yelled, punching Dustin lightly on the shoulder. "That's gross!"

"Just stating the facts, brother," Dustin answered, rubbing his shoulder and scowling at Will a little.

Just then, the door to the cabin opened and Hopper appeared on the porch. He eyed the group suspiciously, since they had immediately fallen silent when they saw him. A telltale sign of guilt if he'd ever seen one. It was obvious they'd been discussing something they didn't want him hearing.

"Bike lesson over?" He called to them casually.

"Yes, over for today," Jane replied, walking toward the cabin. "It's not easy."

"I know, I saw you ride a little," he said, reaching for her hand and pulling her into a one armed hug as she climbed the steps. Seeing she looked defeated, he added, "I'm proud of you for trying, okay?"

"Thanks," she responded, returning his hug. "Hey Dad?"

"Yeah, kid?" He said, going into the cabin, the kids following.

"Were you and Joyce getting it on?"

"Excuse me?!" He sputtered, his eyebrows rising and his voice a near growl. "What in the world, young lady..."

She started to explain, "Dustin said.." but the rest of her sentence was cut off by Mike stepping in front of her and interrupting, trying to diffuse the situation. He knew better than to lie and say Jane had misheard so he opted instead for damage control.

"Dustin was just kidding. He's so funny, you know, yep, always joking around," Mike rambled.

"A laugh riot," Hopper said with a deadpan expression, his eyes fixed on Dustin, who had the sense to look embarrassed. Hopper rolled his eyes then turned his attention to Jane.

"What you said is not appropriate. I really don't want my daughter sounding like a drunken sailor on shore leave. I know you were just repeating what you heard," and he once again glared daggers at Dustin, "Don't let me hear you talk like that again."

Jane nodded, "I won't Dad," and asked, "But what does it mean?"

"I'll tell you later," Mike and Hopper both said at the exact same time, even their inflections in perfect sync. Mike looked horrified as Hopper's eyes narrowed.

"I think she should hear that from me, Wheeler. Don't you agree?"

"Oh, yes, sir, of course. I mean, I don't need to be telling her about getting it on, not that we ever would, uh, I mean," Mike felt like he was digging his own grave but didn't seem able to stop himself.

Hopper looked simultaneously annoyed and entertained, a smirk on his face, when Lucas stepped forward to be the voice of reason. Someone had to save their friend. He put his hands on Mike's shoulders, saying, "Dude, stop. Just stop talking."

Mike's mouth clamped shut, his eyes finding the floor. He drew in a deep breath. He doubted he could ever look the chief in the eye again.

Hopper took the momentarily silence to say, "I think we've had enough lessons for today. Probably time for you kids to be heading home."

Jane shook her head and looked at him with a pleading expression, her eyes wide, "Please, a little longer?"

Hopper sighed at her and relented, "A little bit longer." He was more than ready to reclaim his house from the horde of teens, especially those voicing their concern for his sex life and just what was going on between him and Joyce. Hell, he wasn't even sure himself but he did know they were definitely not "getting it on." He groaned at the memory of moments before when the phrase had come out of his daughter's mouth. Forget monsters and government conspiracies, he thought to himself. It's these kids that will send me to an early grave.

30. Chapter 30- Epilogue

Here it is, folks, a fluffy epilogue ending. Huge thanks to everyone who read and reviewed! I may do a sequel.

"Mrs. Hopper, you seem to have a bit of cake in your hair."

"Well, my husband insisted on trying to feed me a piece and his aim was apparently way off," Joyce laughed, running a hand through her loose curls and watching the crumbs fall to the hardwood floor.

"It's tradition," he replied, "Not my fault you turned away."

"I was afraid you'd mess up my makeup!" She defended herself.

"Have I told you today how beautiful you look?" He wrapped his arms around her waist and brought her closer.

"Nice save, slick," she said, quirked an eyebrow at him. "And yes, you've told me that many times today as a matter of fact."

"Married a whole two hours and I'm an expert. Point to me," he said, bending down to kiss her softly.

"We'd better get back out there. It's kind of rude to disappear from our own party."

"Are you sure?" He asked, nuzzling her neck. "Maybe no one will notice."

"You wish. Come on now, plenty of time for all of that later," she said, reluctantly pulling away from him and smoothing out her dress. Hopper groaned.

"We'd have plenty of time if you'd let me take you on a honeymoon," he commented as she reached up to straighten his tie.

"Seriously, this again?" She asked, playfully patting his cheek. "We've been over this. The kids only have two days of school this week, then two days after that is Thanksgiving. I really want a nice holiday with my family. That means all of us here together. We'll go on a

honeymoon in a few months, like we decided."

"I know, I know. And as usual, you are the voice of logic. One of the many reasons I love you."

At that moment, a curly haired teen in a flowing pink dress appeared in the hallway where they stood. She paused with her hands on her hips.

"Dad! Jonathan is looking for you and Joyce. He says time for more pictures."

"We're coming, kid. Joyce had to get the cake out of her hair before more pictures."

Jane nodded, then turned and walked back into the banquet hall, twirling in her dress in the process.

"She's beaming today," Joyce noted, smiling and taking Hopper's hand, leading the way to the waiting crowd. His only response was a big grin and a squeeze of her hand. As they walked back into the reception, Karen Wheeler immediately pounced on them, pulling them to one side where Jonathan stood waiting to take more photos. On the other side of the room, a group of teenagers were sitting at a round table, copious empty plates stacked around them.

"This food was awesome," Dustin said, leaning back from the table. "If I ever get married, remind me to have those little roast beef sandwiches. I could eat a hundred of them."

"I'm sure your future wife would love watching that," Max said sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

"Mike, know what I made on my math test yesterday?" Jane asked, perching herself on his lap and looking proud.

"No, with all of this wedding excitement, we haven't had a chance to talk about it. How did you do? I know you worked hard," he answered. She looks so pretty, he found himself thinking. She wore a flowered headband that matched the pink in her dress.

"85!" She declared, clearly pleased with herself.

"That's great, Jane!" He complimented her.

"Thank you. You helped me study," she said kindly, her eyes fluttering at him.

"Ugh, you two are gonna make me throw up," Dustin moaned.

"Sure that's not the roast beef sandwiches, dude?" Lucas said, pulling Max to sit on his lap too. He figured if Mike and Jane could do that, they could too.

"My dad was proud," Jane added, ignoring the ribbing going on between the boys. "He asked if that Wheeler kid told me the answers. But he was just joking." Now it was Mike's turn to roll his eyes. The chief never missed an opportunity to give Mike a hard time, even when he hadn't done anything wrong.

"Will is sleeping over at my house tonight. He says his room has a bunch of boxes in it," Mike said. "I wish you could too, Jane."

Dustin snorted. "Like the chief would ever let that happen."

"I tried, Mike," Jane nodded "Asked my dad. He said I could spend the night at your house when hell freezes over. I think that's a firm no."

"I was just trying to be helpful! A lot of Jane's stuff isn't unpacked at Will's house yet."

"And my stuff is piled up in Jonathan's room since he and I are sharing now," Will said, walking up to the table, eating a slice of wedding cake.

"And it's not just my house. It's yours now too, Jane."

"Hey, Will, what are you going to call Jane's dad now? Since he's your stepdad and all?" Dustin asked. Will looked slightly uncomfortable and said, "He told me to call him Hop or Jim if I want to, or he said I could stick with Chief. He was really cool about it."

"Jim? That just sounds weird," Dustin said, giving a shudder and shaking his head.

"Not really your concern, Henderson," came a booming voice from behind him. "You stick with Chief Hopper. Or sir. My stepsons can call me whatever they want," Hopper said, winking at Will, who smiled in return.

Dustin only nodded, looking scared. He was convinced the chief lived to eavesdrop and bust him.

"As for you, Wheeler," Hopper continued, leveling a hard stare at Mike, "It's my wedding day so I'm feeling kind and generous. Otherwise I'd be asking you why the hell my daughter is sitting on your lap. And possibly showing you just how displeased that makes me."

Mike gulped and wanted to retort that Jane had sat on him, it wasn't his idea. Not that he'd been complaining. He chose instead to stand up, Jane following suit.

"We weren't doing anything," Jane told her father, huffing a little

"You'd better not be," her dad teasingly grumbled, then reached for her hand and lead her onto the dance floor. "Spare a few minutes from your boyfriend for a dance with your old man?" He was grinning and twirling her around the dance floor.

"Yes, Dad!" She replied enthusiastically.

"You happy, kid?"

"I'm extra super happy."

And she was.

31. AN

I just posted a continuation of this story so if you liked this one, go check it out! Thanks!